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# READING THE ARCHIVE

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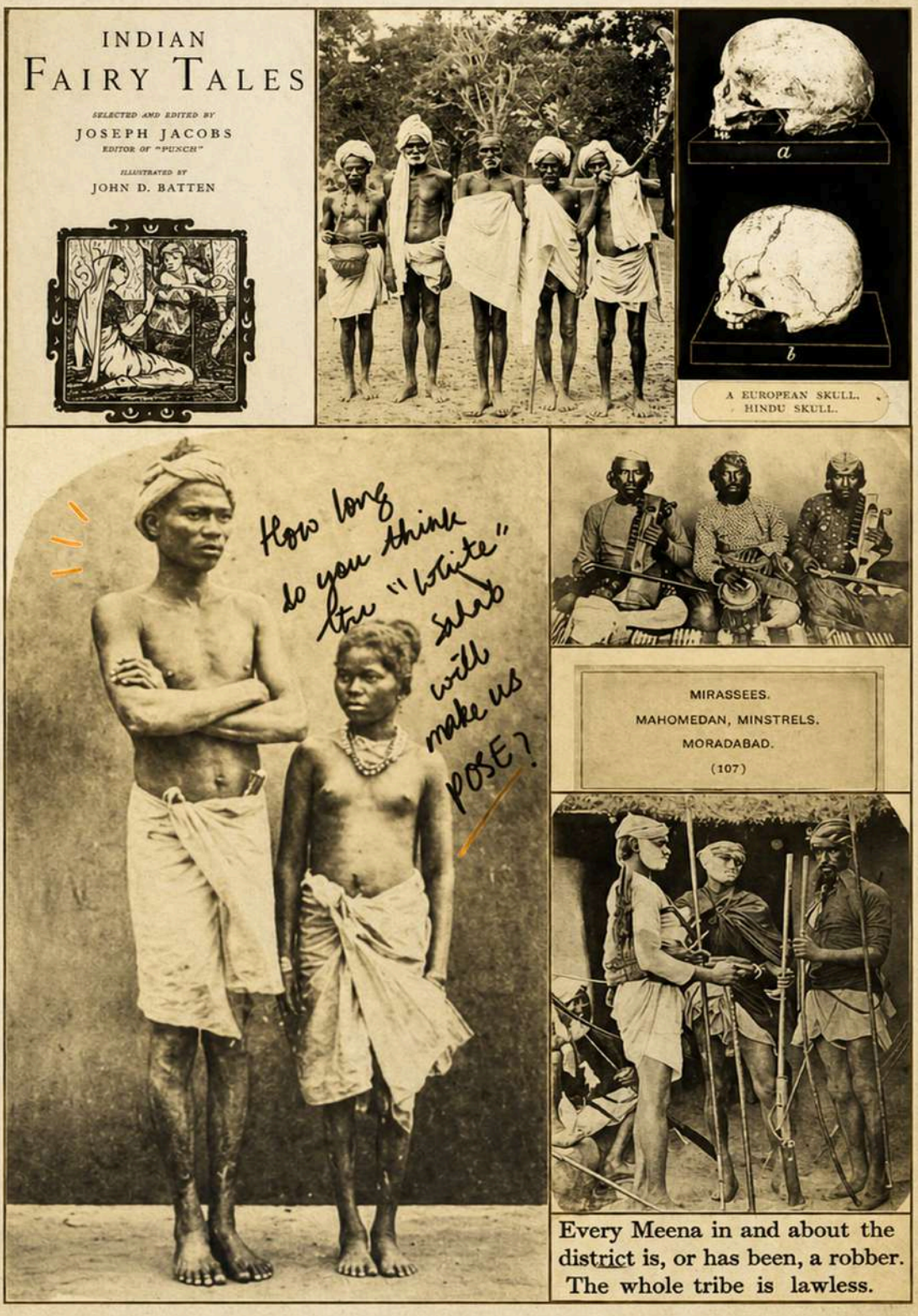


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# History, Narrative and Bardic Historiography

YOGESH SNEHI
Managing Editor, *Reading the Archive*

One of the fundamental discourses in modern historiography has been the pursuit of truth and objectivity. In the last more than a century of debates on 'what is history', this question has been the subject of potent contestations from modern and postmodern historiography. This has led to the emergence of new schools of thought and historical discourses; from Positivism to Social History, Marxism, Annales, to more recent undercurrents like Subaltern Studies, Oral and Memory Studies. Despite these hugely contested questions of subjectivity, historians' agency, post-structuralism, narrative, gender, race and caste blindness in historical discourses, one thing that has remained uncontested is the pursuit of truth in history. In the process, history acquired a coveted place as a discipline, a creator of knowledge, in the social sciences.

It is rare to argue against the pursuit of truth and objectivity in history. This pursuit has also remained the sole purpose of academic history. This pursuit is also coterminous with the emergence of the identity of a historian. This modern practitioner of professional history appears different from the caricature of a bard, a quintessential *mirasi, dhadhi* or *bhat* of North India. These bards were known to serve their patrons for whom they drew family genealogies and emerged as guardians of their ancestry. These custodians and chroniclers of imperial, stately and community narratives glorified the tales of their patrons, imagined their social and political origins, and became agents of the dominant social formation. A bard would therefore appear servile to the patrons. Unlike them, a modern historian appears objectively distant from the subject of their analysis and is visualised as 'witnessing from a distance' the landscape of history.

Historians learned to position themselves as objectively detached from the source of their analysis. On the contrary, the *bahis* of the *bhats*, the ballads of *mirasis* or the *vars* of the *dhadhis,* which performed an important function of social memory, were intimately tied to the families of traditional genealogists.

For historians and social anthropologists, these memories were only a small fragment of the larger social and political process. Historians were particularly aware of the limits of bardic genealogies as a source of history. Bardic genealogies, annals, and chronicles of their patrons, tribes, or states were not considered history proper. Therefore, *Tarikhs*, *Puranic* hagiographies and *Buranjis* were carefully scrutinised; though hagiographies were positioned differently. The shift in modern historiography from Positivism to Subaltern Studies is also an evolution of a historical consciousness in which the identity and the unique positionality of the historian as an independent figure of knowledge production are most important. Like 'arts for art's sake,' the pursuit of history was no longer defined by the state's agenda; history was for history's sake.

Thus, history came to be conceived as a scientific discipline grounded in causality, truth and objectivity. Its claims to knowledge rested on the systematic collection, verification, and critical evaluation of historical sources. In fact, some of the greatest historians have resisted the idea of historians as bards. In delineating its functioning as an academic discipline, history distanced itself from the *oeuvre* of bardic narrative style. One of the most potent debates in history has been to underline how history ought to function not as a narrative tool of the state, but as a narrative of truth. Historians have spent their careers trying to decode how state power functions and how state structures are mere masks that they seek to unmask to reveal the objective truth. It is true that bardic narratives also helped preserve a vast body of oral and literary tradition. Yet, the narrative power of bardic storytelling was derived from the power of patrons, and this relationship defined the nature of medieval and early modern states and societies. When bards wrote about medieval and modern rulers, they functioned within the structures of patronage and state power. Twentieth-century history freed itself from these structures.

The emergence of universities as modern institutions of knowledge in several ways insulated historians from the pressures of contemporary politics. Thus, in post-independence India, a class of distinguished historians and a historiographical tradition emerged, shaping the frontiers of historical knowledge. This push laid the foundation of an intellectual critique of British colonialism, the roots of which lay in the freedom movement. The political

leadership of the new nation-state invested in the creation of autonomous public institutions of global knowledge. Nehru envisioned universities playing an important role in shaping the destiny of the newly independent nation. At the convocation of the University of Allahabad on 13 December 1947, he stated:

> *A university stands for humanism, for tolerance, for reason, for progress, for the adventure of ideas and for the search for truth. It stands for the onward march of the human race towards even higher objectives. If the universities discharge their duty adequately, then it is well with the nation and the people.*

Indian historians took strides in shaping fascinating debates around the question of state, class, caste and gender. In fact, unlike other places, Marxism became an important tool for decolonising Indian history and the Western Marxist paradigm. This intellectual independence was a significant shift from the bardic historiography of pre-independence India, which was significantly shaped by British imperial interests, as well as the interests of a plethora of princely states and dominant mercantile communities in India. Indian Independence was a pivotal moment that shaped the agenda of future writings on Indian history. Universities became an oasis of independent thought—of exploration of ideas, experimentation, and innovation. This is what gave universities immense power to shape ideas for the future of the human condition. The NCERT textbooks produced during the twentieth century, post-independence, are the best examples of these intellectual strides of Indian history. One may argue that the new Indian state patronised these textbooks. But one should also underline the autonomy of the historical enterprise in shaping these textbooks. These still are the finest examples of historians shaping future generations of Indian citizens.

As universities became autonomous, the pressure on them to serve the state's narrative waned. In fact, the boom in intellectual activity in the second half of the twentieth century was a result of freeing universities from the agendas of state power. This independence of historical thought is now under global threat. The rise and persistence of authoritative regimes, even in the world's largest democracies, have posed a significant threat to the very agency of the discipline. Historical discourses are now being pushed into the service of the dominant state. This is happening through huge cuts to grants for social

science research, as well as the narrowing of the agenda of research. The states are now defining research areas, and grants are now solely linked to them. The study of the past is slowly becoming a slave to the narrative power of the state. To return to this narrative of history as a tool to serve state power is undoing the journey that history, as an academic discipline, has undertaken over the last century and more. The pressure of the narrative power of the state is, therefore, a serious threat to history. The blurring of the distinction between academic histories and *bazaar* narratives is undoing the historiographical evolution of an entire century.

What has happened in the past decade, and most recently after massive cuts to funding for the best universities in the US, is that a trend has emerged to purge universities as powerhouses of ideas. Universities must fall in line; they must surrender to state power; they must be driven by the agenda of state power. In the process, they are expected to create the foundation for sustaining the narrative of state power and its idea of a knowledge tradition. One thing is certain: if universities fall, a return to medievalism in human civilisation is inevitable. What is happening in the US and Europe should ring alarm bells across the world. What we are currently witnessing is a knee-jerk reversal of decades—and more than a century—of progress made in fields such as historical method, political theory, gender and sexuality, psychology, and race studies. In a matter of months, humanities and social sciences departments in universities across the world have entered a state of crisis. The Western world is witnessing a massive culling of faculty and funds for social science research. It remains to be seen how long universities can withstand this storm.

But the larger challenge is the intellectual vacuum that the new structures of hegemonic state power will create. In a world defined by the multipolarities of ideological and economic power, it was the critical space of universities that provided avenues to build bridges and gave voice to silences, inequalities, and exclusion. What will happen to the question of caste inequality when it disappears from school textbooks? What will happen to the problem of racial discrimination when the state cloaks it in the powerful narrative of the immigrant or refugee problem? The death of history has gone further than Fukuyama's 'end of history'. It is being replaced by the narrative power of today's hegemonic states, located in the world's two largest democracies. In this search for a great and glorious past, binaries of victims and villains have

been drawn. For the first time since the end of World War II, majoritarian states and their dominant populations have come to identify themselves as victims of history.

In this narrative shift, a mould has been cast. There are fewer alternatives each day that can resist this fundamental shift in the course of history. Western Europe's blind eye toward the massacre of innocent children in Gaza and Iran is akin to the massacres orchestrated by them during the colonial past, which too were met with silence. The US and Israel's war with Iran is pushing humanity into a unipolar world. There is a strange kind of consensus that defines world powers today—from east to west—and that is their thrust toward narrative power, deeply integrated within the web of social media; native versus migrant/refugee; whites of western origin versus immigrant Blacks, browns, and Latinos. This narrative push strengthens the consensus around political power's conquest of universities and the conquest of history. It remains to be seen whether this conquest will be the beginning of the end of history, and whether the intellectual fervour of history will survive the onslaught on democratic thought. With the advent of Artificial Intelligence, history now faces another threat of the fictionalisation of the past.

Despite all these challenges, budding historians contributing to this volume offer us a reflection on the possibilities of history's intellectual independence. By picking up the challenging questions of archives, language, genealogies, gender, heritage, caste, colonialism, cinematic representations, religion, environment, education, political movements, memory, India's partition, visual culture, and vernacular literature, authors in the volume have contributed fascinating research and review articles, and book reviews that shed light on some of the most challenging questions that history encounters today. Essays and reviews on the representation of the Mughals historically and in contemporary India, Dalit lives and modern education, and visual representation and gendered religiosities form the spine of this issue. While a majority of contributions have come from emerging historians, scholarship from literature, sociology, history of education, political science, and anthropology make this volume a truly interdisciplinary enterprise.

The editors are thankful to our blind reviewers, our co-travellers in this project, who devoted their time and insights to strengthen papers and shared

the resolve of this cooperative venture to run a graduate journal. The members of the editorial board, our torch bearers, we are grateful for your constant support and encouragement in the promise of history. We also extend our gratitude to Professor Tanuja Kothiyal, whose gracious acceptance of our invitation to guest edit and write an insightful introduction greatly enriched the issue. Thanks are also due to Professor K. L. Tuteja, who provided valuable feedback for this preface. And most importantly, the student editors of the editorial board who worked tirelessly and devoted their critical time to keep this journal going. The entire copyediting, proofreading and production work, besides social media communications, is handled by the student editors. This is the second year of this emerging journal, and we hope that this lamp will continue to flicker. I am sure readers will find this volume rich in academic depth and immerse themselves in the promise of history as a discipline of knowledge creation.

# Shifting Sands: Do Deserts Have Methods?

TANUJA KOTHIYAL
Guest Editor, *Reading the Archive*

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*Deserts, despite occupying one-third of the globe, have often been treated as wastelands and empty spaces in history writing. This primarily results from both, the limitations of the archive, as well as the absence of a methodology that centres desert as a distinctive ecological, political, social and cultural space. This editorial explores the ways in which global scholarship on deserts has engaged with the question of methodology.*

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**Keywords**: Desert Studies, Ecological history, Saharanism, Thar Desert, Pastoralism

## What's in a word?

The word desert is derived from the Latin *desertum*, meaning left, abandoned, and withdrawn from. In Sanskritic traditions, the word *aranya* appears to encompass terrains like wilderness, away from civilisation or the *grama*, while *maru*, literally alluding to death, is a word that is used to refer to Thar, the Great Indian Desert. Eremology, the term employed for the study of deserts, is itself derived from the Greek word *erēmos*, which can mean desert, wilderness, as well as a solitary space, usually lacking human settlements. So, it is not surprising then that deserts have often been imagined as *terra nullius*, a space of nothing, an emptiness. Addressing these perceptions as "regimes of emptiness," Samia Henni argues that these are deliberately created frameworks that erase human and non-human lives and forces existent in the deserts.[1]

On the contrary, in the Arabic lexicon, there is no single term for desert; *sahrā, baydā, fayfā, ʾbalqa, and barriyya* can all be employed to evoke a nuanced

[1] Samia Henni, *Deserts Are Not Empty* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), 1–22.

perception of the diversity of the desert.[2] In fact, in the 11th century, poet Ibn Arabi's Sufi verses (in continuity with the pre-Islamic *qasideh*), the desert is a site of dynamic creation, loss and spiritual longing, as well as one of perpetual movement and transformation. The traces of creation constantly emerge in new forms despite being obliterated by wind, sand and rain.[3] It is not, therefore, surprising that it was in the wilderness of the desert that some of the most profound revelations were received. In the fourteenth century, the Arab philosopher Ibn Khaldun argued that it was the desert that provided character to the Bedouin, who lost the prowess to negotiate harsh circumstances when they settled in the cities.[4]

## Agrarianism, Sedentarism and the Limits of the Archive

In the histories of empires and nations, the framework to map civilisational growth has been that of agrarianism and sedentarism, the ability of people to settle and produce food, and of the states to tax it.[5] History writing, therefore, frames the shift of power structures through control over land and what it produces. Moreover, regions and ecologies themselves get marked by states, and their histories are shaped through a deeply anachronistic understanding of their locations. Over the years, there have been attempts to frame methodologies around ecological spaces, like oceans, rivers, forests and mountains, that argue that specific ecologies produce distinct contexts that are essential to developing an understanding of the region.[6] Increasingly, these

[2] H. Elsayed, "The Desert, Poetry and Ibn ʿArabī," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 52, no. 5 (2025): 1291–1303, https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2024.2423720.

[3] Elsayed, "The Desert, Poetry and Ibn ʿArabī," 1294-98

[4] Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History: The Classic Islamic History of the World*, ed. N. J. Dawood, trans. Franz Rosenthal (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 95–107.

[5] There is a rather wide body of literature that argues and counter-argues if humans preferred settlement to itinerancy. However, James C Scott's *Against the Grain* can be an important work to follow these arguments. James C. Scott, *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017).

[6] Lucien Febvre's *A Geographical Introduction to History* and Fernand Braudel's *Mediterranean* are two important milestones in framing the relationships between history and geography in social sciences. Lucien Febvre, *A Geographical Introduction to History*, trans. E. G. Mountford and J. H. Paxton (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1932); Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, trans. Siân Reynolds, 2 vols. (London: Collins, 1972–73).

methodologies, rather than depending merely upon the archive produced by the state, seek to explore the alternative archives of everyday practices in documentary, visual, oral and material forms to arrive at a deeper understanding of regions and how they are experienced. These approaches are highly interdisciplinary, and thus in many ways produce a richer understanding of everyday lives in hitherto ignored ecologies.

Deserts, however, have remained on the margins, metaphorically as well as literally, despite forming one-third of the total landmass of the earth. Unable to come to terms with the mobile nature of the desert societies, the colonial archives created imaginaries of the desert as ones that produced or sheltered disorder. Whether it was the Mongols of the Central Asian deserts, the French imagination of predatory Berber in the *bilad es siba* in the Sahara, or the "lawless" *Khossas* and *Sodhas* in the British accounts of the Thar desert, all were seen to be operating outside the pale of civilisation.[7] In this archive, the desert was not merely an unproductive space; it was also outside of governance. This archive thus produced narratives of banditry, lawlessness and predation, that fundamentally rendered the mobility of these regions as criminal. Itinerancy was the basic resource strategy, as well as a way of life in the deserts, that had been traversed by a range of itinerants, including pastoralists, armies, merchants, and bards. The mobility of these groups was historically seen as antithetical to states and was criminalised under colonial regimes through legal instruments. Sedentarism promoted by states became not merely a strategy but also a mechanism of establishing a social hierarchy that often put the mobile communities at the lowest rung of the social ladder.

## The Desert Instrumentalised: Settlement, Extraction, and Violence

Deserts were also seen as spaces of want, where lives were lost to hunger, thirst and violence, practically lands of death. Colonial (as well as post-colonial) states' policies in these spaces were also geared towards settlement

[7] For detailed discussions of the concepts of *siba* and *makhzen*, see Ernest Gellner, *Saints of the Atlas* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969); Geoff Watson, "Representations of Central Asian Ethnicities in British Literature c. 1830–1914," *Asian Ethnicity* 3, no. 2 (2002): 137–151, https://doi.org/10.1080/14631360220132709. For a discussion of nomadic tribes in the Indian Thar, see Tanuja Kothiyal, "Frontiers, State and Banditry in the Thar Desert in the 19th Century," *Economic and Political Weekly* 52, no. 15 (2017): 61-67.

and canalisation in the desert to 'green' them, and also to 'settle' them. Success of state policy was measured in terms of settlement, and in terms of increase of 'green' cover, often by the plantation of invasive and alien species, that eroded the natural vegetation used by pastoralists, who formed the mainstay of the desert eco-systems.[8]

To understand these paradoxes in the context of North Africa, El Guabli employs the framework of 'Saharanism' as a deeply racialising and extractive imaginary that deprived deserts of everything they were and instead employed imaginaries of emptiness, lifelessness, and danger.[9] These reductionist imaginaries create deserts as spaces where legal and ethical constraints of 'civilisation' do not apply, whether in colonial or post-colonial contexts. In fact, within this framework, deserts often turned into sites where violence could be experimented with.

In 1945, the Jornada del Muerto desert in New Mexico was the site of the Trinity test, the first nuclear detonation in history, which paved the way for the atomic bombs that were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Since then, deserts across the world have hosted over 2,000 nuclear tests, working on the idea that deserts are empty spaces which can be utilised for destructive purposes.[10] The 'murderous history' of the Atacama Desert, recorded in the poetry of Chilean poet Raúl Zurita, is revealed in the form of disappeared bodies of dissidents during the Pinochet regime (1973-90), whose bone fragments are being searched by mothers to this day.[11] Examining the border control mechanisms in the Sonoran Desert in Arizona borderland in the USA, De León argues that the US immigration department has deliberately turned the Sonoran Desert into a 'killing machine', by funnelling immigrants into the

[8] For a comprehensive discussion on these processes see Diana K. Davis, *The Arid Lands: History, Power, Knowledge* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016).

[9] Brahim El Guabli, *Desert Imaginations: A History of Saharanism and Its Radical Consequences* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2025), 1–31.

[10] Samia Henni, "Terra Nucleus: Radiating Desert Lives," *The Funambulist: The Desert*, no. 44 (November–December 2022): 60–67.

[11] Daniel Borzutzky, "New Deserts of Chile: Raúl Zurita's Atacama Forms," *The Funambulist: The Desert*, no. 44 (November–December 2022): 52–59. Also see the film, *Nostalgia for the Light.* Directed by Patricio Guzmán. Berkeley: Icarus Films, 2010.

desert.[12] Pushed on remote, hostile trails away from settlements, immigrants become subject to 'necroviolence' as even their remains disappear into the desert. Thus, deserts are employed for purposes that other lands cannot be, like nuclear tests, necroviolence, or the dumping of hazardous waste. The deserts, thus, are either dangerous spaces that need controlling, or are empty wastelands that require to be rendered productive or useful in one way or the other.

## Can Deserts have a Method?

Given this context, how does one develop a methodology for studying deserts, and the historical shifts that have taken place in their social, political and ecological structures? One of the ways that most historians (including the author) employ is to read the statist archives against the grain, for the absences, and highlight the discursive practices of erasure. This, in some cases, allows the foregrounding of erasures, but often falls short of building a narrative where ideas and practices central to the desert environments are underlined, not as marginal practices but as central ones.

So, the question that one faces here is how to write histories of deserts?

The approach to a method for deserts is a quest that researchers across the world are individually or collaboratively engaged in. Emerging as powerful critiques of earlier approaches, most of these works argue the need for decolonial approaches to reframe deserts as places that are actively 'alive', rather than just 'survivals'. This at the outset requires us to view deserts as distinct ecologies in their own right, rather than through frameworks of 'what they are not'. Here, it might also be useful to bring the Braudelian *longue duree* into discussion and see the deserts through the context of a distinct, perhaps slower-moving, deeper geological time. The arguments of productivity and perennialism that are associated with agrarianism also seek to frame geographies into timed cycles of production and consumption. Seasonality, cyclicity, and movement all acquire different meanings in deserts, which need to be taken into consideration. In examining the Australian Outback, Smith argues that deserts are ecologically distinct spaces where factors like climate

[12] Jason De León, *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 23-62.

variability, scarce resources, sparse population, remoteness, social variability, local knowledge, and cultural differences are causally linked and together create a 'desert' syndrome.[13] These factors explain why deserts, in this case the Outback, function differently from densely populated areas.

Another factor that several works on the deserts demonstrate is that desert sociality is framed through mobility and connection. Writing of the Atacama Desert, the driest of the deserts across the globe, Gallardo et al. argue that deserts are constituted as familiar inhabited spaces through mobility.[14] Mobility in these landscapes is not merely a response to scarcity but a fundamental practice of social reproduction, place-making, and world-building. Here, mobility does not merely refer to long-term ancient movements but to overlapping circuits of movement that constitute the Atacama Desert as a rather familiar, densely connected landscape. By connecting localities and modalities of movement, it becomes possible to see that the desert, rather than being an empty or marginal space, is a network of communities connected to each other. A similar argument was made by the author of this editorial (2016) for the Thar desert in South Asia, arguing that the Thar as a region was historically constituted more by the mobility of its itinerant populations than by any political boundaries that framed it.[15]

These approaches might perhaps allow for a shift in perceptions of deserts and for the framing of research paradigms that foreground the deserts for what they are, rather than what they are not. In doing so, we not only require shifting the notions of time and space within which we attempt to frame desert histories, but we also need to realign our archive. Depending on archives created by settled and sedentary states has its limitations. These archives negate the non-linear and polyvocal histories of deserts, preserved in their materiality, in their shifting sands. This materiality requires to be examined through multiple collaborative methodologies, including those that hold desert at the centre, rather than at the margin. By centring the desert and its

[13] Mark Stafford Smith, "The 'Desert Syndrome': Causally Linked Factors That Characterize Outback Australia," *The Rangeland Journal* 30 (2008): 4-6.

[14] Francisco Gallardo et al., "Desert Travels in the Atacama: Making Place through Movement (c. 2500–1500 cal BP)," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 28 (2022): 170-71.

[15] Tanuja Kothiyal, *Nomadic Narratives: A History of Mobility and Identity in the Great Indian Desert*. New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2016. See Introduction.

people, and by weaving together the threads of mobility, ecology, and memory, we can begin to write histories that are as resilient, complex, and dynamic as the sands themselves. In doing so, however, we need to be cognizant of the shifting nature of the deserts themselves, as visible in the Great Indian desert or the Thar.

## Reimagining the Thar Today

In the case of the Indian Thar, the shifts in the materiality of the desert, partitioned now between two nations, have become more and more apparent over the last few decades. The transformation of the Indian Thar is framed through shifting narratives of development, where the aspiration for the desert has shifted from 'greening' of the desert to harnessing the desert sands and winds. As researchers attempt to find meaning in the sounds and appearances of the desert, it also becomes clear how much of the desert itself has been reshaped.

This reshaping of the Thar, particularly from the context of the Indira Gandhi Canal (IGNP), a massive irrigation and settlement scheme in the Thar Desert driven by a sedentarist imaginary, and its subsequent impact on pastoralists and farmers has been explored brilliantly by Rahul Ghai.[16] He draws upon an older historiography of ecology in the region that questions descriptors like overgrazing and desertification in association with pastoralists.[17] Challenging the idea of pastoralism as an anachronistic practice, Ghai, in fact, centres it as a way of life through the long history of the Thar desert. The article points towards a radical post-canal shift in the nature of commons in the region, which have now been parcelled into private land holding. This has created a context for epistemic violence where pastoralists have been pushed aside in the discourses on development in the reshaped ecological imaginary of the Thar. Ghai argues 'development' needs to be mediated through dialogue in

[16] Rahul Ghai, "Understanding 'Culture' of Pastoralism and 'Modern Development' in Thar: Muslim Pastoralists of North-West Rajasthan, India," *Pastoralism* 11, no. 3 (2021): 1–19.

[17] For context see, Paul Robbins, "Pastoralists Inside-Out: The Contradictory Conceptual Geography of Rajasthan's Raika," *Nomadic Peoples* 8, no. 2 (2004): 136–49; P. S. Kavoori, *Pastoralism in Expansion: The Transhuming Herders of Western Rajasthan* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).

the Thar and can only take place through compassionate engagement with pastoral cultures.

The other important shift that has taken place in the Thar region is the increased securitisation of the Thar following the ever-increasing Indo-Pak hostilities. The firming of borders has reshaped networks of travel in the Great Indian deserts, disrupting pastoral, commercial, religious, as well as social networks. Exploring the impact of bordering on the Muslim Jatt pastoralists of the Banni region in Kutch, at the far end of the Thar, Farhana Ibrahim highlights the contradictions in pastoralist framing around the ideas of migration and belonging.[18] The question of belonging becomes sharper on the reconfigured pilgrimage networks, whereby pilgrims seek to visit shrines across the borders on illegal routes. On the one hand, border shrines like that of Tanot Rai acquire new locations in the emerging narratives of nationalism, which portray the Charani goddess as the guardian of the border; on the other hand, the same landscape is increasingly recast as a site of leisure and spectacle. Visits to the militarised shrine are now packaged alongside tours of the sand dunes at Sam, so that the very border that turns the goddess into a guardian of the border also turns her shrine into a tourist attraction.[19]

Alongside these historical and ecological approaches, literary and folkloric methods offer another productive inroad: tracing the persistence of older love narratives like that of Dhola Maru and Umar Marvi across the divided desert. Kothiyal argues that in these narratives, the desert, rather than being a space of loss and want, emerges as a space of desire and longing, a protagonist in itself.[20] New scholarship continues to open further pathways into the region. For example, Ayyagari (2022) studies the world of the Manganiyar, hereditary Muslim musicians of the Jaisalmer-Barmer borderland, to explore how caste, patronage, and the global world-music economy intersect in the Thar desert.

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[18] Farhana Ibrahim, "No Place Like Home: History, Politics and Mobility among a Pastoral Nomadic Community in Western India." *Nomadic Peoples* 8, no. 2 (2004): 168–84.

[19] Tanuja Kothiyal, "Crafty Devis of the Thar: Refashioning Charani Sagatis in the Indo-Pak Borderlands," in *Studies in Religion and the Everyday*, ed. Farhana Ibrahim (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2024), 269–292.

[20] Tanuja Kothiyal, "Songs of Longing: Love Narratives and the Geographical Imaginaries of the Thar Desert," in *Desertscapes in the Global South and Beyond: Anthropocene Naturecultures*, ed. Sushila Shekhawat, Rayson K. Alex, and Swarnalatha Rangarajan (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2024), 127–41.

Ayyagari examines how as traditional patron-client ties erode, musicians reinvent themselves as entrepreneurs of a marketed 'authenticity', even as caste violence and uneven development continue to disrupt their lives.[21] Ghai (2021) also explores the musical archive of the Mirs of Chitrang, reading their songs as an ecological and spiritual archive. This archive contains references to grazing routes, rains, grasses, camel caravans, as well as the moral universe of Sufi devotion. The music of Mirs is an evidence of a "culture of pastoralism" encompassing knowledge of sheep-breeding, water-sharing customs, land ethics, and of a holistic pastoral rationality that "modern development" experts fail to reckon with.[22] On the other hand, Sarveswaran (2024) turns to *Under Another Sky,* an eco-documentary, to examine ecological grief in Piplantri, a village in the Thar that is a site of legal and illegal marble mining through the lenses of solastalgia, soliphilia, and ecomasculinity.[23] The Thar, thus, continues to offer contexts for developing methodologies for reading a desert that keeps reshaping itself — through wind, sand, stone, water, capital, border security, and its music alike.

## In this issue

This second issue of *Reading the Archive* makes a similar attempt by reorienting notions of archive as well as method. The papers published in this volume are all by young scholars at various stages of their research journeys. Each of these papers and reviews attempts to create new archival and methodological pathways. The cover design by Keerthana Geerish critically engages with the colonial ethnographic archive as modes of classification and control, which continues to inform historical research in India. While Shivatva Beniwal examines the role of indigenous classificatory systems in the creation of caste-based identities, Arishdeep Singh engages with the Punjabi Dalit Archive in an attempt to carve an autonomous history of Dalit movements in the region. Sushma's article on Dalit women's songs pushes the boundaries of

[21] Shalini R. Ayyagari, Musical Resilience: *Performing Patronage in the Indian Thar Desert*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2022.

[22] Rahul Ghai, "Understanding 'Culture' of Pastoralism and Shalini R. Ayyagar, 'Modern Development'.

[23] Vidya Sarveswaran, "Under Another Sky: A Triptych in the Thar Desert," in *Desertscapes in the Global South and Beyond: Anthropocene Naturecultures*, ed. Sushila Shekhawat, Rayson K. Alex, and Swarnalatha Rangarajan (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2024), 165–80.

conventional archives to argue that women's oral traditions become modes of documenting microhistories of everyday Dalit life.

This volume has three contributors who write about the emergence of frameworks of education under colonialism. Amy Tucker reads colonial correspondence both with and against the grain to uncover the violence that settler indigenous peoples were subjected to in the framing of open learning systems in Canada. This paper should be read alongside Nazreen's paper on colonial policies and vernacular education in the region of Moradabad, India, to see how colonial education policies can be viewed variously in different contexts. Shrishti Khanna's paper on Dalitudhar Sabha, led by the Arya Samaj movement, explores the complex relationship between social reform movements, education and caste in colonial India.

Three articles in this volume foreground the gender question in history writing. Sushobhita Talukdar's paper on Sankardeva and Women explores the complex relationship between Neo-Vaisnavism and the questions of gender. Sinjini Biswas, in her paper titled 'Being the Goddess,' attempts to understand the everyday phenomenology of the home by examining closely the rituals involving women in Bengali households. Punita explores the production of colonial knowledge about female infanticide, which shaped social change, affecting caste dynamics and traditional marriage practices.

Rishiraj Bhowmick examines the feasibility of semi-autographical texts as sources for the production of historical knowledge. Joysmita Roy's paper explores the visual archive of political posters to illustrate how such documents have remained important in the construction of power, ideology, and resistance in times of crisis and transformation. Shambwaditya Ghosh explores the Sunder Nursery in Delhi to examine gardens as an architectural archive that helps us in locating shifting social and cultural contexts in Delhi. Hindol Nandy's paper studies the rise of the Maoist movement in Nepal in the 1990s to explore the complex character of identity when explored through a Marxist lens. Finally, Aditya Lakshmi R.'s paper examines the disjuncture between policy and lived experiences in the disaster management policy in the flood-prone Nilgiri hills.

From oral traditions to visual archives, from colonial correspondence to ritual practices, the contributions in this volume collectively affirm that the historical method is most potent when it mirrors the very ecologies it studies—interconnected, layered, and perpetually in motion.

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# Of Bodies, Binaries, and the Colonial Gaze

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*This cover design essay attempts to critically examine the nature of colonial ethnographic archives and the ways through which they constructed knowledge about colonised subjects. Ethnographic photographs, anthropometric imagery, textual excerpts, and other visual interventions are utilised to reflect on how bodies were staged and reduced into categories, while also gesturing towards the possibility of reading against the archive's grain. Through these juxtapositions, the cover design attempts to expose how colonial archives transformed colonised bodies into objects of observation, classification, and control.*

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**Keywords**: Colonial photography, Colonial gaze, Anthropology, Ethnography, Archive, Folklore collection, Knowledge production

To look at an archive is often to assume that one is looking at the truth, because often images and records appear to offer a stable and objective account of the past. But what if the act of looking itself is structured by power? The colonial archive, particularly in its ethnographic form, emerges as a site in which bodies were observed, arranged, and made legible through systems of classification. In this process, rather than as an individual, the subject is encountered as a specimen within a larger schema of knowledge. The central theme of the essay and the accompanying cover design is that the colonial ethnographic archive was an active repository where the camera functioned as an instrument of bureaucratic violence. The cover design, therefore, attempts to assemble these fragments as visual evidence of the logic that made up colonial knowledge systems.

The idea for this work emerged from a growing discomfort while engaging with archival material. Returning to discussions on colonial photographs and ethnographic records, I found myself drawn not only towards what was being shown but also to the conditions under which these images were produced. The underlying patterns of these "ethnographic" projects also became difficult

to ignore. The rigidity of poses, the repetition of certain bodily types, and how, almost always, the subjects were unnamed, as if they were present yet voiceless in these photographs. Additionally, in many of these photographs (For instance, see figure 1 and figure 2), the subjects also appear frontally positioned and 'well' arranged for the purpose of identifying their 'variant types'. It was this imposed silence that also prompted an intervention. In the central image, a speculative point-of-view dialogue is scribbled - "How long do you think the white sahab will make us pose"? (see figure 1). The line neither claims authenticity nor does it fall into artifice. It is an attempt to momentarily restore a louder voice in support of the pent-up discomfort of the subjects towards the authority of the colonial gaze.

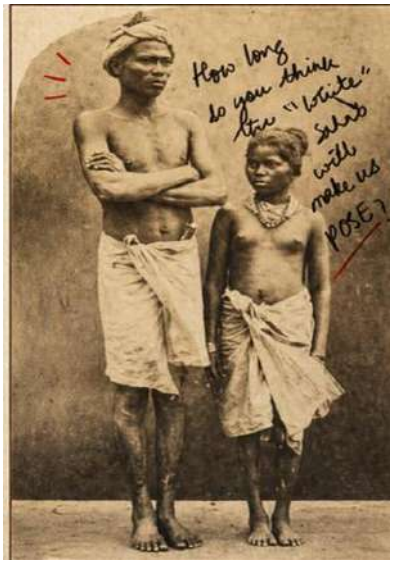


**Figure 1:** Pulayas of Travancore

This silence, even if they appear incidental, is something that is often embedded in the logic of photographic representation itself. Allan Sekula notes, photography produces "a silence that silences," operating through what he calls the "mute testimony of the picture."[1] The authority of the image then lies when the photograph speaks, but the subject does not. The addition of three sharp, almost animesque red lines (see figure 1) in the same image is a further attempt to interrupt that visual 'harmony'. To break the illusion of neutrality and highlight the discomfort is the main aspect that the original photograph refuses to acknowledge. These photographs, even if they present

[1] Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October* 39 (1986): 5.

an appearance of order and calmness, are also suggestive of the unequal conditions under which they were produced.

The staged nature of these images becomes clearer when read alongside the history of anthropological photography. The selected photographs in the collage also reveal a certain desired, performative quality through their poses, plain backdrops, and repetitive framing techniques. Images were rarely candid, picaresque capturing of societal life (see, for instance, figure 2). Instead, they were structured by whatever the authority behind the camera deemed to be of 'observable quality.' The apparent stillness of the photograph, therefore, does not make it a passive product. This becomes evident in the "illuminating" advice offered in Portman's 1896 article: "If a subject is a bad sitter…send him away and get another, but never lose your temper, and never show a savage that you think he is stupid… be willing to bribe him into silence."[2]

**Figure 2:** Paraiyans[3]

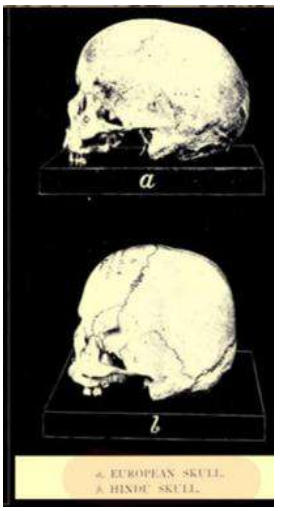


**Figure 3:** Comparison of Skulls (of Hindus and Europeans)

[2] M. V. Portman, 'Photography for Anthropologists', *Journal of the Anthropological Institute*, 25 (1896), p. 75.

[3] "Paraiyans", Edgar Thurston and K. Rangachari, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, vol. 6 (Madras: Government Press, 1909), 113, image, Wikimedia Commons. Accessed May 15, 2026. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Castes_and_tribes_of_southern_India._Assisted_by_K._Rangachari_%281909%29_%2814587479437%29.jpg

What is being proposed here is not a technical instruction, but a method that prioritises the image over the subject and the control over their agency. As Christopher Pinney describes, this reflects an "anxious discipline at work in the construction of anthropology's disciplinarity,"[4] where the photograph must be carefully staged to produce an aesthetically acceptable subject.

**Figure 4:** Purriar Meenas[5]

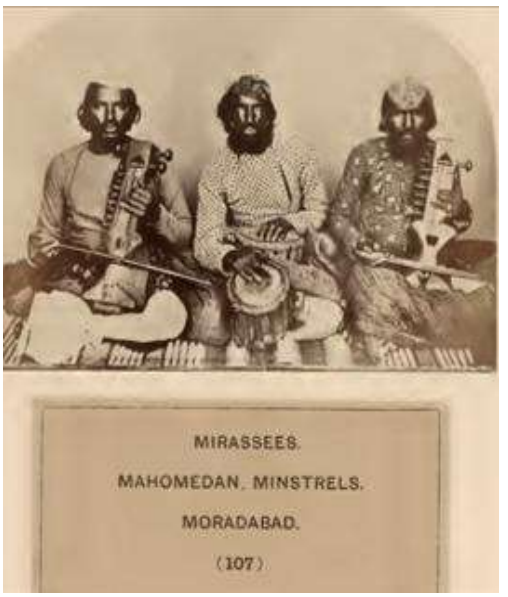


**Figure 5***:* Mirasis[6]

This process of visual ordering is also closely tied to broader systems of classification within regimes of colonial knowledge. The inclusion of anthropometric imagery in the collage, i.e. the 2 skulls which differentiate between a "Hindoo Skull" and a "European Skull" (see figure 3), hints at a colonial impulse desperate to categorise human difference. These 'scientific' curiosities swiftly became part of a wider administrative logic. Bernard Cohn talks about these colonial systems like censuses, which worked through "classifications… in terms of social precedence," transforming fluid identities

[4] Christopher Pinney, *Photography and Anthropology* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011), 41

[5] "Purriar Meenas" in J. Forbes Watson and John William Kaye, eds., *The People of India*, vol. 7 (London: India Museum, 1876), 5–6.

[6] "Mirasees" in Forbes Watson and John William Kaye, eds., *The People of India*, vol. 2 (London: India Museum, 1868), 198.

into fixed hierarchies.[7] In the Indian context, such classificatory regimes played a crucial role in reinforcing and rigidifying categories like caste, rendering them legible to the colonial state while, at the same time, creating a residual of the same process - itinerant, nomadic, criminal.

The archive did not stop at physical measurement, and often added visuals with text to actively criminalise and dehumanise entire communities. In the collage, the photograph of the Purriar Meenas (figure 4) is intentionally paired with historical textual excerpts that attempted to 'rationally' explain their inherent 'notoriousness' as a criminal tribe, and justify their surveillance and containment under laws like the Criminal Tribes Act, 1871. Similarly, the breed-like categorisation of the Mirasis (figure 5, referred to as "Mirasees" in colonial texts) reveals how knowledge production was explicitly used to stigmatise and marginalise communities.

What emerges, as a result, is an archive that not only records and produces differences but also decides what is worth recording in the first place. This is yet again epitomised in the inclusion of the front cover of Joseph Jacobs' Indian Fairy Tales (figure 6). What appears on the surface as a compilation of 'good old' folk tales, in fact, is a carefully curated collection which, as Sadhana Naithani notes, "cannot be defined only by what they include, but… also by what they exclude."[8] And obviously, narratives that did not align with this framework were not documented as narratives at all.

This selective absence in the archive also prevents any attempt to 'recover' silenced voices from the same. As Anjali Arondekar asks, "What if the recuperative gesture returns us to a space of absence?"[9]. It is also important to recognise that the colonial archive is so fundamentally fractured by design that one cannot simply 'recover' an unblemished subaltern voice from it. The visual interventions, along with the imagined dialogue, do not seek to fill that

[7] Bernard S. Cohn, "The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia," in *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), 230.

[8] Sadhana Naithani, "An Axis Jump: British Colonialism in the Oral Folk Narratives of Nineteenth-Century India," *Folklore* 112, no. 2 (2001): 184

[9] Anjali Arondekar, *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 1-2.

void definitively. Instead, it is a plea for counter-reading of these produced knowledge regimes, and to realise the limits and incompleteness of archival recovery itself.

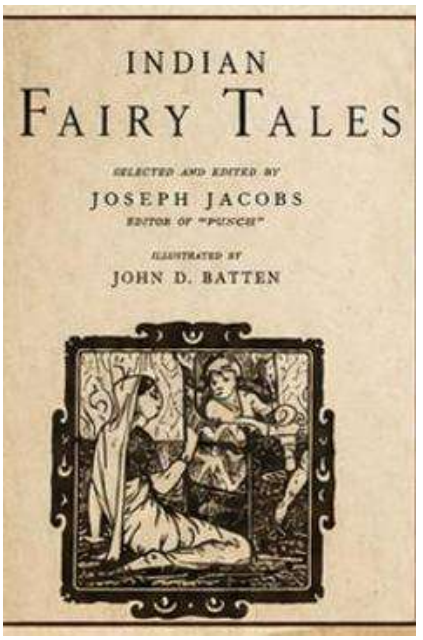


**Figure 6:** Front cover, Indian Fairy Tales[10]

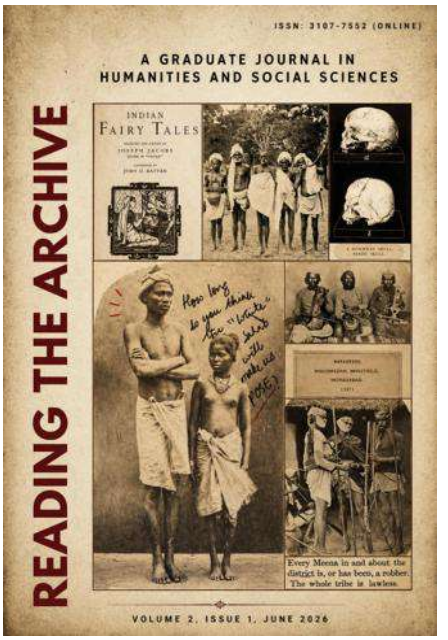


**Figure 7:** The Cover Design

This absence is also linked to the broader dynamics of power within historical writing. Ranajit Guha's critique of colonial historiography as being "dominated by elitism" highlights how certain voices are privileged while others are systematically excluded.[11] And the subjects in all these colonial curiosity endeavours occupy a similar position of being placed under certain rigid binaries of civilised/savage, rational/superstitious or loyal/notorious.

"Of Bodies, Binaries and the Colonial Gaze" is not an attempt to fix the archive, but one to sit with its discomforts. It asks what it means to look at images and narratives that insist on their neutrality, even as the conditions of their making suggest otherwise. If the colonial archive sought to fix bodies within rigid categories, then perhaps the task of reading it today is not to accept its terms, but to loosen the frames that once claimed to define them.

[10] Joseph Jacobs, *Indian Fairy Tales* (London: David Nutt, 1892), cover image.

[11] Ranajit Guha, "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India," in *Subaltern Studies I*, ed. Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982), 1-2.

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# Desire and Defiance: Autobiographical Conflict in *La Nuit Bengali* & *Na Hanyate* as Historical Archives

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*This paper attempts to examine the archival feasibility of semi-autobiographical texts as sources for the production of historical knowledge. Taking Mircea Eliade's La Nuit Bengali and Maitreyi Devi's Na Hanyate as case studies, the aim is to understand the perils of archival use of conflicting autobiographies and semi-autobiographies in creating conventional historiographies. Rather than treating these texts as repositories of verifiable truth, the paper explores how their contradictions illuminate the cultural, social, and gendered dynamics of their historical moment. Drawing on theories of autobiographical and textual interpretation, it argues that such writings, despite their subjectivity, can function as alternative archives for understanding memory, identity, and cultural encounters.*

**Keywords:** Archives, Autobiography, Cultural Encounter, Colonial Narrative, Postcolonial Literature, Historical Knowledge

## Introduction

In recent decades, autobiography has emerged as a critical site for historiographical intervention. Previously dismissed as too subjective, too literary, or too partial to qualify as 'real' history, autobiographical writing is now being reassessed as a powerful, unconventional form of historical knowledge. This reassessment comes at a time when history itself is undergoing epistemic re-evaluation, with increasing attention to microhistory, marginalised voices, and the performative aspects of historical writing. Autobiographies can reveal histories which are otherwise ignored or even silenced by an 'official' archive. The autobiographical consciousness, as Karl Weintraub asserts, emerged when an individual developed a historical understanding of the self, and was 'guided by a desire to discern and assign meaning to a life.'[1] While not dismissing any previous attempts to write about

[1] Karl J. Weintraub, "Autobiography and Historical Consciousness," *Critical Inquiry* 1, no. 4 (June 1975): 824.

the self, the genre's explosion occurred after the 1800s, which corresponded to the shift in the intellectual culture that saw human life not as a fixture in time, but as part of a historical process that is shaped by temporality, evolving worldviews and personal development. In order to gain the historicity pertaining to one's life, there has to be a vantage point, a firm ground from where one can retrospect upon one's experiences and its shifting development—instead of being actively involved in the making of life, the autobiographer stands at a position from where all the events are on display with retrospective clarity. In terms of historiography, the facts of the autobiographer's life are connected only later, not while they were taking place; the values that are assigned to any moment that may guide the writing of an autobiography are almost always written after, not during, its occurrence.

When a historian considers autobiography as a valid archive for writing history, a major challenge presents itself in terms of the text's provenance. While a conventional text of history is based on archival materials, data and evidence which could be corroborated against related materials, an autobiography relies solely on the narrator's memory as the main source for information, which Lynd Forguson calls perversely selective."[2] It is memory's limitation that often leads to recalling events differently, resulting in misinterpretations or misrepresentations of certain events in an autobiography, making frames of reference to any claims largely unavailable for corroboration. While Forguson and Weintraub maintain the position that the memory repository at the disposal of the autobiographer is quite unique and, unless there is a reasonable doubt, personal memories can be trusted as a valid source. However, limitations in such texts do create a dilemma for historians using autobiographies as an archive.

The other issue with autobiographies is the retrospective bias which emerges from the fact that the author's knowledge of how an event turned out potentially distorts the narration, leading them to assign significance to past actions and decisions based on their outcomes rather than how those events were experienced at the time, thus furnishing them with a more orderly version than perhaps was genuinely perceived at the moment; such biases

[2] Lynd Forguson, "Autobiography as History," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 49, no. 2 (Winter 1979/80): 142.

raise concerns about the historical accuracy of autobiographical accounts. If the primary purpose of an archive is the production of historical knowledge, then any bias in an autobiography violates that function, revealing an epistemological tension. Thus, in light of such conflicting ideas that are inherent in an autobiography, the primary question that this essay intends to investigate is how one can read autobiographical narratives as alternative archives when there is a possibility of the distortion of truth.

## Biography of Autobiography

The basic definition of autobiography can be considered as the literary embodiment of selfhood—a stable mode of writing in which an individual narrates the story of their life, thereby affirming both the coherence of experience and the authenticity of voice. Yet, as theoretical and feminist interventions since the 1970s have shown, this apparent stability conceals deep ideological and epistemological fissures. What appears to be a transparent narration of the self is, in fact, a complex negotiation among history, language, and power. As James Olney argues, "if autobiography is the least complicated of writing performances, it is also the most elusive of literary documents."[3] In as much as this is so, the argument here is that autobiographies have always been shaped by cultural, social, and ideological pressures rather than being neutrally self-reporting. This understanding of the text treats autobiographies as more like interpretative constructions, rather than factual vessels of one's life.

Philippe Lejeune marked a pivotal moment in autobiographical theory when he defined the genre as a "retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality."[4] This formulation of autobiography echoes earlier definitions of the genre by Georg Misch's characterisation, which saw autobiography as 'the description (*graphia*) of an individual human

[3] James Olney, ed., "Autobiography and the Cultural Moment: A Thematic, Historical, and Bibliographical Introduction," in *Autobiography: Essays in Theoretical and Critical* Olney (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 3.

[4] Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, ed. Paul John Eakin, trans. Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 4.

life (*bios*) by the individual himself.'[5] This established the genre's features—retrospection, identity of the author, and a claim of truth, which establishes the text's referentiality. Lejeune proposes certain preconditions which are required to call a text an autobiography:

1. A form of language that is narrative prose, not poems or ballads.
2. A subject treated as an individual life and a story of personality.
3. A situation where the author and narrator refer to a real person.
4. A position where the narrator and principal character are identical.

Any deviation from any of these points dismantles the basic principle of the genre. His central innovation, however, lies in the assertion of an "autobiographical pact,"[6] which transforms the said features into a contractual relation of trust. According to him, the pact is a social contract whereby the reader accepts the narrative to be true because the author promises that "I, the one who writes, am identical with the one who lives and is represented."[7] Simply put, it is a guarantee that the author's name on the cover of the text assures the truth of the account. Yet, considering the argument that the autobiographer only narrates their story after a certain time has passed in their lives, the very act of self-writing fractures any supposed unity proposed by Lejeune, as the 'I' that writes is never the same as the 'I' who lived. Lejeune's claim has been challenged by pointing out that autobiography is always a form of self-construction shaped by time, language, and culture, and that the 'self' it presents is created by narrative, not recovered from the past.

While Lejeune's framework provides clarification on why authorship, referentiality, and self-identification remain central to autobiography, the gap between the one who writes and the one who lived the experience reveals the inherent instability of these categories. Acknowledging this instability is crucial for understanding the contradictions that structure the semi-autobiographical narratives of Eliade and Devi, in which the same life and its events are recounted from two distinct positionalities. Consequently, the

[5] Georg Misch, *A History of Autobiography in Antiquity*, cited in Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 195.

[6] Lejeune *On Autobiography*, 4-8.

[7] Ibid., 4-8.

reader must negotiate not only two autobiographical selves but also two significantly divergent accounts, an issue to which the following discussion will turn.

The issue with both Misch and, by extension, Lejeune's approaches to autobiographical texts was their exclusivity. For Misch, autobiographies were "representative of their period,"[8] with public figures as ideal subjects, entangling the genre with nation-state formation. The 'great man' trope dictated the approaches to the understanding of autobiographies, creating what Smith and Watson suggest, a "master narrative"[9] that defined Western culture. It was this Eurocentric model that did not take into consideration the self-representations penned by marginalised communities, women and non-Western traditions. Like Misch's high-culture bias that excluded diaries, letters, and indigenous oral forms, Lejeune's model privileges alphabetic, written texts from literate, Western traditions. His focus on the proper name and readerly contract assumes a cultural context where individual biography is valorised over collective storytelling. Furthermore, Lejeune's autobiographical pact centres a 'flesh-and-blood' author-reader coupling within print culture, thereby excluding 'those who do not write,' perpetuating the imperial master narrative of Western rationality.[10] The decades following Lejeune mark a decisive intellectual turn in autobiography studies, one that sought to dismantle the very exclusivities that Misch and Lejeune had naturalised.

As Smith and Watson observe, the post-1970s period witnessed a shift from the search for definitional stability to a recognition of autobiography as a performative and discursive act. Theoretical approaches no longer assumed a unified self, transparently represented in language, but understood self-narration as a process that was mediated by culture, ideology, and the textual form. The interventions of structuralist and post-structuralist critics like Barthes, Foucault, Derrida, and Lacan were quite instrumental here, as they displaced the notion of autobiography as the truthful account of a pre-existing

[8] Misch, cited in Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 195.
[9] Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography,* 197.
[10] Ibid., 193.

self.[11] Pertaining to this intellectual reorientation, critics like James Olney, Elizabeth Bruss, Mary G. Mason, etc., had begun to reconceive autobiography as dynamic and process-based, rather than documentary. Bruss's notion of autobiographical acts framed self-writing as a form of performance. As she argues, an autobiography is 'an action that exemplifies the character of the agent responsible for it."[12] In doing so, she shifts the critical focus from defining what autobiography is (a fixed literary category) to examining what it does; how the act of writing produces, shapes, and performs a version of the self.

The feminist reading of autobiographies deepened the reorientation by interrogating the gendered foundations of autobiographical discourse itself. This orientation revealed how the traditional model of the autonomous, self-authorising 'I' was in fact a masculinised fiction, one that excluded women's relational and embodied modes of self-narration. For feminist scholars, autobiography is not simply a site of self-expression, but a field of ideological struggle where questions of authorship, authority, and subjectivity intersect. Mary G. Mason traces the emergence of a women's autobiographical tradition through early examples such as Dame Julian's *Revelations*, Margery Kempe's *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Margaret Cavendish's *True Relation*, and Anne Bradstreet's *To My Dear Children*. She argues that these works collectively mark a paradigm of women's life writing characterised by a mode of interior disclosure that contrasts with the male autobiographical emphasis on individual self-creation.[13] While autobiographies written by men often emphasise a unified, independent self, framed as a brave journey of self-discovery and developing consciousness, women's autobiographies tend to construct their identity relationally, emphasising how the presence of others, often a male family member or the family in general and their recognition shapes their self-formation. Mason posits that female selfhood in autobiography is linked to an identification of some "other,"[14] suggesting a

[11] Considering the expanse of Structuralist and Post-Structuralist philosophies, discussions regarding Derridan, Lacanian or Foucauldian stances on autobiographies would be prolonged. For more, see Smith and Watson.

[12] Elizabeth W. Bruss, "Eye for I: Making and Unmaking Autobiography in Film" in Olney, *Autobiography*, 300.

[13] Mary G. Mason, "The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers" in, Olney, *Autobiography*, 207-35.

[14] Ibid., 210.

more interdependent, dialogue-based concept of identity rather than an isolated, autonomous self. Positing that there is an inherent, structural difference between an autobiography authored by men and women, she argued that,

> … the dramatic structure of conversion that we find in Augustine's Confessions, where the self is presented as the stage for a battle of opposing forces and where a climactic victory for one force—spirit defeating flesh—completes the drama of the self, simply does not accord with the deepest realities of women's experience and so is inappropriate as a model for women's life writing.[15]

Mason's approach anticipates and pointedly contributes to feminist autobiography criticism. It foregrounds the 'female difference' in life writing, underscoring how women's texts resist masculine narrative conventions in selfhood construction. This relational selfhood suggests that female autobiographies explore identity as 'with others', offering a more interdependent and socially embedded self. Within this paradigm, the Eliade-Devi narration situates itself perfectly by highlighting this contrast. Eliade's account presents a largely self-made, coherent self-following the male-coded model of individual growth, while Devi's writing is a relational account, shaped by family and social connections. Their narratives reveal how gendered patterns in autobiography influence both the telling and the understanding of a life. What makes the texts more relevant here is the position of their experiences seen from Mason's vantage point.

Similarly, Shari Benstock, in *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Autobiographical Writings,* interrogated how women's autobiographies disrupt patriarchal selfhood, revealing the self inherently connected to others and shaped and evolved over time. Yet this raises a key question—can the 'self' ever be truly independent enough to write an autobiography, when viewed through a feminist lens? Her framework hinges on the tension between theory and practice, where autobiography mediates "the space between 'self' and 'life' that the biography suggests would traverse an effort to recapture."[16] This

[15] Ibid.

[16] Shari Benstock in, *The Private Self: Theory and, Practice of Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Shari Benstock (London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 11.

negotiation, she argues, is profoundly gendered, inviting "the female, a separate graphic space at the very limits of the generic and the gender divide."[17]

It could be argued, then, that from a feminist perspective, the notion of a completely independent, autonomous self finds no ground, as human identities are shaped in relation to others. The individual self, far from the realm of unrestricted agency, is a construct fastened with power asymmetries of race, class, and gender that an autobiography both conceals and confesses. Benstock further cautions against the overuse of a theoretical approach—if feminist theory exposes autonomy as an illusion, then criticism itself can reproduce the illusion by applying totalising theoretical frameworks that erase the specific, embodied conditions of women's writing. She warns that theory must not pretend its own position is autonomous either. The critic's method is also shaped by the same power systems and can easily reproduce them. Extending her argument further, it can be suggested that an autobiographical text cannot be understood outside the social structures and gendered expectations that produce it.

The critical debates regarding autobiography's true place in the academic world press on with society's own pace, particularly in the context of archival feasibility. The illusion of such narratives being of a unified self has long dissipated, and so has the exclusionary nature of the genre. Once considered a mere recounting of one's life, which perhaps had some value for it to be penned down, autobiographies, owing to the constant reorientation of their position and their authorship (which now seems far more important than ever before), can now be read as texts that are collective, intersubjective, and historically embedded rather than purely individual accounts. Philosophically, one can be tempted to venture further into the matter. The whole idea of an autobiography lies in the 'I', the self; at the very least. It can be assumed that in its basic form, the genre is concerned with the idea of the self as something presented on a world stage. When one considers the arguments thus far, it can be suggested that the 'I' in autobiography is neither purely individual nor wholly absent. It is a philosophical paradox; a necessary fiction that both reveals and conceals, inviting the reader to question the self

[17] Benstock, "Autobiographical," 2.

and to see it as a mirror of the collective, a narrative not of isolation but of interdependence. In this light, autobiography becomes less a recounting and more a meditation on the human condition—fragile, illusory, yet profoundly real in its striving.

## Methodological Outline

If the limitations of autobiographies as archival sources seem slightly insurmountable, the subgenre known as semi-autobiography decidedly blurs the line between creative reconstruction to fill the gaps in memory and outright invention of moments that may or may not have occurred. In this subgenre, the association with real history is obvious and only thinly disguised; at other times, the real elements are heavily altered or hidden through imagination, making it difficult for the historian to ascertain the truth. The following analysis focuses on two texts, Mircea Eliade's *La Nuit Bengali* (1933) (hereafter LNB) and Maitreyi Devi's *Na Hanyate* (1974) (hereafter NH). Presented as semi-autobiographies, these two texts present a compelling case study, through which both these narratives present a shared life from different perspectives; the connection between these two texts is one of claims and reclamation.

Here, it is important to understand the rationale for selecting LNB and NH as case studies. While there are far too many autobiographies that are readily available for a discussion regarding their archival feasibility as sources of socio-cultural history, it is not often that two bodies of work of the genre converse over a singular matter or event, yet have diametrically opposite points of view. As mentioned earlier, LNB and NH share the lives of Mircea Eliade and Maitreyi Devi, who, from different times in their lives, recount the same event. And both being the key protagonists in their own and each other's narratives, the reader would expect that, owing to the difference in perspectives, the narrations would at best modify certain moments in their lives to complement the overarching account. What makes LNB and NH important case studies here is the characteristics of their content.

To begin with, both of these texts violate the schema proposed by Lejeune; that is, they do not conform to his criteria of author-narrator-protagonist identity

or to the referential contract that defines autobiography.[18] Although, as asserted earlier, Lejeune's autobiographical pact gets violated by the logic of two 'selves'—the 'self' that writes is not the same as the one that has lived the experience, for the sake of a cohesive argument, one can momentarily assume that Lejeune's schema, with its exclusivity, holds theoretical ground. In that case, both LNB and NH violate the point of the author's situation, i.e., that the author must be a real and identifiable narrator, and that the story is told by the narrator while assuming the status of the subject. Eliade, the real author, signed the text with his name; the first-person narrator was Alain, a fictionalised stand-in for himself. This created a deliberate veil of fiction, transforming the work into a *roman à clef*[19] rather than a direct self-narration. Readers familiar with Eliade's life inferred the referential link, but the pseudonym broke the pact's demand for unmediated identity between author and narrator, emphasising imaginative reconstruction over literal testimony. In the same way, Devi authored the book under her real name, but the first-person narrator was Amrita, a thinly veiled version of herself. Like Eliade's, this too introduces fictional distancing: Amrita's story blends Devi's actual memories, philosophical reflections, and family anecdotes with invented details, thereby undermining the author-narrator equivalence. Devi wrote it explicitly as a rebuttal to Eliade's 'fantasies,' prioritising emotional truth and cultural correction over unadorned factual reporting. It is this politics of remembering and the constant navigation between truth and invention, as will be made clear in the essay, that make these two texts sincere contenders for the entire debate.

Fundamentally, Maitreyi Devi's work claims a more important position in the debate. As the gendered, feminist critique of autobiography has suggested, any self-narrative written by a woman is not purely individual but relational to her family, society, times, etc. Thus, when a reader approaches NH, it is seen that the text was created from a relational context, i.e., Eliade's LNB. Devi's text, at the same time, is autobiographical, a rejoinder, an attempt at reclamation of lost agency and authorship of a woman at the hands of a Western man, and has a nationalist outlook. Whether her work has an archival value or not is contingent upon its reading. When read with LNB, it slightly loses its credibility as an autobiography, at times reduced to a counter-

[18] Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, 4-8

[19] A literary work where real people and events are described with invented names.

argument by its readers. However, when read as a standalone piece, the same text becomes a postcolonial commentary on women's condition.

As for the use of the term 'semi,' the functionality of the word is based on the nature of the text itself. Here, the prefix is used not to denote incompleteness but to indicate a narrative hybridity. It acknowledges the fictionality of the case studies presented here without relinquishing referential ambition. The semi thus becomes a marker of textual consciousness, an admission that the autobiographical impulse cannot be fully disentangled from the aesthetic and imaginative modes of writing. As opposed to the term fictional autobiography, semi-autobiography is not an oxymoron. The former one is, operationally, a practice in contradiction. For if a text claims to be fictional, then it disrupts the very concept of being a personal narrative. Semi-autobiography, however, admits invention without rejecting the personal truth; the question, then, is not whether semi-autobiographies tell the truth about history, but what they can reveal about how history is made through writing.

If either Eliade or Devi had opted to write a fictional story based on some event of their lives, it would not have violated the laws of autobiographies; however, considering the intricacies of their texts, one cannot call them entirely fictional, but not purely autobiographical either; thus, from a literature-philosophical understanding, calling LNB and NH semi-autobiographies provides one the required arena to explore the axis of inquiry. Can one, considering everything that these two works propose, see them as archival materials? When taking into account the fact that both of these texts were written across colonial and postcolonial fault lines, the problem of truth becomes the very condition of their interpretive richness, but without dismantling the idea of them being personal narratives at the core. In essence, semi-autobiography is not a marker of insufficiency but of narrative self-awareness. This genre allowed Eliade and Devi to navigate the space between memory and imagination, producing texts that are historically meaningful, precisely because of their hybrid form.

## Fiction as Autobiography

The claims and projections of LNB are countered by NH, creating a problem of ethics in the process of creative reconstruction, while challenging a historian with the dilemma of choosing the version that retains the truth. To complicate

matters further, Eliade himself admitted in his 1981 factual autobiography that LNB was exaggerated for literary success, confirming that significant portions of his novel were fictionalised and shaped by external motivations rather than historical accuracy.[20] The interplay between these texts raises profound questions about the reliability of autobiographies as sources of historical knowledge, thus masking the credibility of an autobiographical account for critical assessment when conflicting narratives exist. Since autobiography is, by and large, a form of personal history, it raises several important questions. To what extent does an author's cultural and ideological position shape the recollection of events? How do literary, commercial, or ideological motives influence the function of the text as a historical document? More importantly, when autobiographical narratives are fictionalized, whether deliberately or subconsciously, what are the ethical and historical implications for those whose lives may be distorted or misrepresented in the narrative?

Eliade's sojourn to India was facilitated by his doctoral thesis on yoga and Indian spirituality. In 1928, he acquired a scholarship from the Maharaja of Kassimbazar and travelled to India to gather first-hand knowledge about the country and its spiritual traditions. He had specifically written to Surendranath Dasgupta, an eminent philosopher and professor at Calcutta University, and moved to Calcutta for his studies. Under Dasgupta's tutelage, Eliade began his training in Sanskrit and the schools of Indian philosophical systems. It was during this time that he met Maitreyi Devi, Dasgupta's sixteen-year-old daughter. By his own admission in the 1981 autobiography, Eliade's relationship with Dasgupta was that of a mentor and mentee, where Eliade had become Dasgupta's favourite disciple and perhaps even an adoptive son.[21]

The romantic phase in Eliade's life came to be when, in 1930, at the behest of Surendranath, Eliade moved into the Dasgupta household. The romance was a short-lived one, as it had tainted the Bengali sensibilities of the family, and Eliade was asked to leave the Dasgupta residence. Eliade returned to Romania in 1933, after an eventful time in an ashram in the Himalaya, and decided to

[20] Mircea Eliade, *Autobiography, Volume 1, 1907-1937: Journey East, Journey West*, trans. Mac Linscott Ricketts (United States of America: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 238, accessed August 11, 2025. https://archive.org/details/autobiography0000elia_g4i8/page/n5/mode/1up?view=theater.

[21] Eliade, *Autobiography*, 185.

write LNB (originally as '*Matreyi*' in Romanian) for a literary contest. In his autobiography proper, Eliade confessed that writing *Maitreyi* was never in his plans, as he was already working on a different novel, but due to an impending deadline, he discarded that work and penned down *Maitreyi*. Perhaps it was the memory of the event that was so fresh in him, a romance and its failure at a tender age, that found its way in the drafts of his "confession,"[22] as he claimed.

This particular event, of love and loss in Eliade's life, is what Weintraub suggests as a moment of crisis,[23] beyond which narrators would find their vantage point to write their autobiography. However, it was also in this narration of tragedy that Eliade had imposed major creative liberties, especially regarding the portrayal of his relationship with Maitreyi Devi, which later on became the pivotal moment for Maitreyi Devi to write *Na Hanyate*. LNB is a case of an archetypal autobiographical fiction; the novel presents itself as a personal recollection, yet its structure and dramatic elements reveal Eliade's conscious manipulation of the past for artistic and professional gain. His later admission not only calls into question the factual reliability of his novel but also exemplifies how autobiographies, especially those written with literary aspirations, can function as acts of self-mythologisation rather than historical documentation. Weintraub argues that autobiography is always a reconstruction of the past, where the individual selects, omits, and reinterprets events based on their present self-conception.[24] Eliade's portrayal of himself as Alain projects him as a tragic, misunderstood figure, caught in a doomed love affair with an Eastern woman; Eliade's self-mythologisation arguably contributes to the retrospective construction of selfhood, in which autobiographers reshape their past to fit their desired narrative identity

## No Love Lost: The Rashomon Effect in LNB and NH

In the case of a singular autobiographical novel, an author could be excused for certain embellishments done for the commercial success of the work. In such cases, objective truth is not entirely the prime focus of the text but its

[22] Ibid., 239
[23] Weintraub, *Autobiography*, 824.
[24] Ibid., 826-7.

saleability, provided that the text itself does not deviate entirely from the truth, but perhaps discards certain moments or reinterprets other events. By and large, it is upon the reader to interpret the text and verify its truth if possible; at any rate, the reader understands the portions where certain things might be slightly distorted. The problem arises, or specifically arose in the case of LNB and NH, because it puts the readers into a dilemma of choosing a version of truth; the loss of objectivity here is staggering, as both works can be assumed to be valid. Even though NH comes as a rebuttal to LNB, the binary of either/or could not be strictly applied to either, thus creating a Rashomon effect, where multiple and often contradictory narratives appear regarding a particular event. In the case of these two texts, the Rashomon effect comes in the form of Eliade's erotically graphic description of their affair and his claims of physical intimacy with Devi, and Devi's outright denial of the same, claiming that their romance was on a more spiritual level than anything else.

From Eliade's point of view, India appears through the much recognisable tropes of twentieth-century European fiction—the Orient with its deep mystical enigma, a place to decode and, most importantly, a place where sexual fantasies ran rampant. In one of the most erotically charged moments in the novel, Eliade describes Devi as 'desire incarnate.'[25] One argument could be made here that Eliade's work was ultimately a product for the Western market, and a novel that was based on India would attract a certain audience with a prejudiced notion regarding India and its people, especially the women. It seems that for all his erudition, Eliade could not escape the pitfalls of the colonial literary tropes, especially when the claim of the novel was that it was autobiographical. In the same scene, Eliade writes,

> … her eyes fixed on me as though I were the embodiment of some god…While I retained my lucidity, handling my experience with love with rationality, she gave herself up to it as though it had a divine origin, as though the first contact of her body with that of a man were some supernatural event.[26]

[25] While the essay has taken *La Nuit Bengali* and *Na Hanyate* as its case study, the translated versions are being cited for lingual convenience. LNB is cited as *Bengal Nights* and NH is cited as *It Does Not Die*. Mircea Eliade, *Bengal Nights*, trans. Catherine Spencer, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 96.

[26] Eliade, *Bengal Nights*, 96.

Here, Eliade's prose participates in precisely the dynamic that feminist philosophers such as Shari Benstock caution against: the appropriation of female experience into a male narrative of self-fashioning. This not only reduces Maitreyi into an object of carnal desires, but it also snatches away her agency as a person who has lost all sense of control and, at the same time, elevates the European man who handles "experiencing love with rationality."[27] Devi's supposed surrender affirms Alain's masculinity and European rationality.

Eliade extends this logic further towards Maitreyi's other relationships as well, particularly her devotion to Rabindranath Tagore. Devi's adoration of Rabindranath Tagore is a well-known fact, so much so that when her first book was published at the age of sixteen, the preface was written by Tagore, and her experience with the poet was published as *Mongpute Rabindranath* (later translated as *Tagore by Fireside* by herself, published in 1943). While Devi repeatedly frames Tagore as her spiritual guide and a father figure, Alain looks at this relationship from a very distorted, disturbing lens, as he confesses "the poet is much more than a guru to her; he is a friend, a confidant, a fiancé, a god - perhaps a lover... 'I cannot marry a woman who has loved another man before me, I told her."[28]

While it may be argued again that the work, being a semi-fictional version of lived reality, allows for such instances to be discarded as portions of imaginative liberties, one cannot help but wonder whether these thoughts of Alain actually belonged to Eliade; if it were so, then the moment of jealousy could be validated, provided that LNB is read as a standalone text. But when read alongside NH, these insinuations appear not as imaginative liberty but as distortions of a real relationship and a real young woman's reputation. Eliade uses the concept of physical intimacy not just to describe their relationship, but as a weapon as well. By the end of the novel, after Alain was expelled from the Dasgupta residence following the affair's coming to light, he comes to know that Maitreyi, in the most desperate moment, had "committed a shameful act. She gave herself to the fruit seller... Maitreyi has gone to Midnapore, to give birth…supposedly in secret."[29] Commenting on

[27] Ibid., 96.
[28] Ibid., 65.
[29] Mircea Eliade, *Bengal Nights,* 175.

these fantasies in LNB, Sriparna Basu argues that Alain/Eliade's love was not for the 'real' Maitreyi but for her exoticised, idealised absence; "Alain desires Maitreyi to the fullest, without the accompaniment of doubt or disgust, only insofar as she is physically absent or separated from him. Maitreyi can only be present as an absence,"[30] in a way, Maitreyi's physical presence disrupts Eliade's fantasy.

The fruit-seller incident then becomes a striking example of narrative punishment, where Eliade fabricates Maitreyi's supposed descent into social degradation. Basu finds in this a 'sadomasochistic pattern' where Alain's erotic investment turns into an intention to witness Devi's humiliation and suffering, which for Basu suggests a "radical negation of empathy.''[31] Alain ceases to understand Devi, or even protect her; the moment she becomes sexually autonomous (whether through rumour, imagined infidelity, or actual action), she ceases to function as his Oriental muse. The depiction of violence that displays this negation forms in layers—beginning with physical beating, where "Mrs. Sen had called the chauffeur and ordered him to beat her daughter, in front of her, with a birch rod,"[32] followed by the symbolic degradation of Devi by giving herself to the fruit-seller, which finally brings forth her descent into a mental collapse, which Eliade thinks is because of him.[33]

It would seem that even in a moment of personal trauma and agony faced by Devi, Eliade retains his centrality, shifting the onus onto her so that her 'madness' becomes a product of devotion to him rather than the outcome of her own desires or suffering. One could align this with Mason's assertion that women's autobiographical identities are fundamentally relational, shaped through socio-familial ties that structure the female self.[34] In Eliade's account, Devi's 'madness' becomes relational to Alain, rendering her condition and by extension her 'self' contingent upon his perception. Although Mason's

[30] Sriparna Basu, "Passionate Fictions: Horizons of the Exotic and Colonial Self-fashioning in Mircea Eliade's Bengal Nights and Maitreyi Devi's Na Hanyate" *Genders*, no. 33 (2001), 12, accessed August 11, 2025, https://www.colorado.edu/gendersarchive2001/08/01/passionate-fictions-horizons-exotic-and-colonial-self-fashioning-mircea-eliades-bengal.

[31] Sriparna Basu, "Passionate Fictions", 12.

[32] Mircea Eliade, *Bengal Nights*, 155.

[33] Ibid., 176.

[34] Mason, "The Other Voice," 210.

formulation is meant to describe how women write themselves, it is revealing here because Eliade exploits that relational mode to limit rather than express Devi; he grants her no emotional life outside him. Her 'madness,' pain, and longing are made intelligible only insofar as they affirm Alain's centrality. What results is not Devi's relational selfhood, but a relational scripting imposed by Eliade, in which her identity is allowed to matter only because it revolves around him.

In feminist autobiography theory, the woman's 'I' rarely stands as an isolated consciousness; it emerges through reciprocal ties and the ethical demands of family and society. As both Mason and Benstock note, women often narrate not from a position of sovereign individuality but from within networks of attachment that determine what may be remembered or disclosed.[35] Devi's writing exemplifies this mode; her self-understanding remains inseparable from her family's honour, her father's authority, and the cultural codes governing feminine dignity. The descriptions of physical intimacy, familial violence, and libellous moments in Eliade's version had the greatest impact on Maitreyi Devi. Confronted decades later with the contents of LNB, she writes, "that man lived in our house, as my father's student, and was much benefited by us. He has repaid it by taking revenge…. In the innocent heart of a little girl there was no dirt. The filth has been created by that man in his imagination."[36]

Here, the autobiographical 'I' speaks not as a romantic heroine but as an older woman reclaiming authority over her past. Her intervention embodies exactly what Weintraub terms a "moment of crisis," the point at which autobiography becomes necessary to repair a misrepresented life. Devi's narrative is therefore not an attempt to refute every detail of LNB but to restore the ethical and emotional integrity of her younger self. Perhaps in the most colonial manner, the destruction of Maitreyi is proof of Eliade's importance and impact—the closure, if any, is a self-serving one. Maitreyi is not granted narrative survival; her subjectivity is expended to preserve the protagonist's fantasy and his centrality in the story.

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[35] Mary G. Mason, "The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers," in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. James Olney (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980); Shari Benstock in *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Shari Benstock (London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

[36] Maitreyi Devi, *It Does Not Die*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 214-215.

It is interesting to note the dissonance in Eliade's position in the novel from his actual sentiments penned in his real autobiography. While in LNB, Maitreyi's transformation into a person of desire or a sexual being makes her a subject of suspicion to Alain, as displayed by his remark about Tagore and Devi, and also with other men of the household, he writes it in a more covert manner:

> I saw that black, dirty hoof, darkened by the sun and from walking on tar, come into sudden contact with Maitreyi's soft flesh - a contact warm with the promise of an entire body... I would have liked to read in them the sensuality that the trembling of that flesh, pressing against the flesh of the young man, betrayed.[37]

In his autobiography proper, however, though he seldom mentions the relationship, he does admit that the abrupt dislocation from the Dasgupta residence had impacted him quite adversely, stating that "along with the friendship of the Dasgupta family, I had lost India itself…. This India that I had begun to know…was now permanently forbidden to me…our hope – mine and Maitreyi's – that we would be married, had been born of an illusion."[38] The dissonance between LNB and Eliade's autobiography exposes how Eliade's autobiographical 'I' sits uneasily within Lejeune's autobiographical pact, which requires the narrating 'I', the name on the cover, and the lived individual to coincide. Eliade violates this on several fronts. He adopts a fictionalised name, Alain, replaces his Romanian identity with a more prestigious French one, and relies on an Orientalist erotic fantasy that severs the link between the narrator and the lived self. Rather than offering referential transparency, his 'I' becomes a stylised persona, a shifting composite of ethnographer, lover, victim, and hero. In place of Lejeune's promised truthfulness, Eliade's narrative enacts what Barthes describes as a 'dispersed subject'–not a stable identity defined by internal contradiction, but a self-fragmented across multiple narrative roles.[39] In this sense, Eliade's autobiographical 'I' functions less as a transparent reflection of lived

[37] Mircea Eliade, *Bengal Nights*, 70.

[38] Eliade, *Autobiography*, 187.

[39] Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 143.

experience than as a literary construction that simultaneously reveals and obscures the self it claims to represent.

His entire position is subverted in the fictional world that does not match his true self. Raul Carstocea explains this gap by suggesting that while Basu's assessment (and other postcolonial readings as well) of LNB's violent and self-serving Western exoticisation is correct, Eliade's personal background should not be glossed over.[40] Eliade was not British but Romanian, and thus he did not belong to the colonial ruling class; he came from a semi-peripheral Eastern European culture. According to Carstocea, Eliade's position as a European in the Western world was that of an "in-betweenness".[41] While racially he was European, he belonged to a culture that was subordinate in the Western hierarchy; he was both inside and outside of the colonial setup at the same time.

What made Eliade use the colonial tropes in LNB, explains Carstocea, was the Romanian intellectuals' Francophilia—"Not quite English but not Romanian either, the French Alain also stands for the culture that interwar Romanian intellectuals preferentially emulated."[42] This emulation of French culture was, in more than one way, an aspiration of Romanian intellectuals—who had been sidelined by their western counterparts—to be globally visible and claim an equal sophistication of Western Europe. The reason why Eliade did not choose to make his character a Romanian scholar but a French engineer is further explained as "the conspicuous absence of 'Romanian-ness' is a commentary upon the 'invisibility' of a culture that has not yet produced an articulated "identity discourse.''[43] More precisely, Eliade erased his own nationality in the fictional retelling of his life and replaced it with a culturally prestigious identity, so to speak, that his own intellectual peers admired. The French

[40] Raul Carstocea, "The Unbearable Virtues of Backwardness: Mircea Eliade's Conceptualisation of Colonialism and His Attraction to Romania's Interwar Fascist Movement" in Siegfried Huigen and Dorota Kołodziejczyk, eds., *East Central Europe Between the Colonial and the Postcolonial in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge Imperial and Post-Colonial Studies (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023), 113-140, accessed August 14, 2025, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-17487-2.

[41] Raul Carstocea, "The Unbearable Virtues of Backwardness", 122.

[42] Ibid.,122.

[43] Arina Cirstea, "Re-writing the colonial story in Mircea Eliade's Maitreyi and Maitreyi Devi's Na Hanyate," cited in Raul Cartocea, "The Unbearable Virtues of Backwardness," 122.

identity carried an international recognition and literary capital that the Romanian identity lacked. In such circumstances, producing a conventional colonial romance heavily loaded with cliches and tropes seems logical, considering the audience it catered to.

However, it makes one ponder whether the tropes employed in LNB were an absolute necessity or not. Even if the novel was following the market trend of the twentieth-century colonial world, did Eliade consider the implications that would have far-reaching consequences, especially when none of the characters was invented? Eliade later confesses that "not for a single moment did I stop to consider what an indiscretion I was preparing to perpetrate."[44] However, it does not entirely absolve LNB of its slandering content to the postcolonial critics. In Indian society, where women's reputations are closely tied to cultural notions of chastity and respectability, Eliade's false portrayal had the potential to cause real social harm to the Dasgupta family.

Textually, Maitreyi Devi's autobiographical fiction satisfies Weintraub's assertion of 'moment of crisis' in an autobiography, as discussed earlier, to its fullest extent. Devi became privy to the existence of Eliade's work from her father in 1938, yet she had no idea about the contents of the text and naturally had no impulsion to pen down her version of the events. In 1972, a friend of Eliade, Sergui, came to Calcutta to meet Devi and reported to her the contents of LNB. Having the book translated from French to English, Devi was shocked by the representation of their relationship by Eliade.[45] In 1973, Devi was invited to the University of Chicago to deliver lectures on Rabindranath Tagore, where she met Eliade a number of times. All of these culminated in 1974 as *Na Hanyate*.

Her work, as opposed to Eliade's, was not to seek any literary validation, nor did it follow any particular postcolonial literature trend to demonise the Western man. NH became a rejoinder to LNB, correcting the incongruities made by Eliade. In this work, Amrita (Maitreyi) fell in love with Mircea Euclid (Eliade), but ultimately their story could not come to fruition, mostly because

[44] Eliade, *Autobiography*, 240.

[45] Ginu Kamani, "A Terrible Hurt: The Untold Story behind the Publishing of *Maitreyi Devi*," *Toronto Review* (1996), reprinted on the University of Chicago Press website, accessed August 11, 2025, https://press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/143651.html.

of her family's dismissal of this relationship on the pretext of cultural differences and the incompatibilities of customs between the East and the West. At any rate, the basic premise remained the same—that of a romantic affair that remained unfulfilled. However, it was within this overarching premise that the inconsistencies of LNB bent the narrative out of shape, and NH's primary attempt was to reshape it. As a standalone text, it reads as a romantic novel, that is, as long as the actual interpersonal relation between the author and the subject remains out of context.

When read in conjunction with LNB, NH begins to become more than that—it is not just a rebuttal to Eliade's indiscretion, but begins to function principally about reclamation of the Indian image – to de-mystify the Eastern woman, to reclaim her own agency as a human and not a mere plot point. What makes NH an interesting text is that Maitreyi Devi does not deny the romantic relationship between her and Eliade; she holds it as closely to her existence as she could without compromising her life after the affair, without letting the colonial structures dictate her narrative. NH has long circulated as the counter-voice to LNB, yet the specific stakes of its 'writing back' are often flattened into simple correction or personal vindication. NH, on the other hand, emerges less as a memoiristic rejoinder and more as a cautious narrative that tests the limits of colonial stereotypes, of the ethnographic gaze, and the sentimental codes that govern cross-cultural romance. For Devi, Eliade's claim that their romance involved sexual consummation was not only false but dishonourable within her socio-cultural context. As she writes, "Indian women have come to have fixed ideas about bodily purity. I was certainly not free from that. For example, they can love no one but their husbands; if anyone does otherwise, it is considered a most degrading act."[46]

The social context is important here, for such acts were not only degrading, but they were also certainly seen as a disgrace to one's personal image as well. The severity of these norms underpins her position, and that of all Indian women. The ignominy that would and does befall the Indian woman is a fate worse than death; Devi writes, "I am an Indian woman, I have family, future,

[46] Devi, *It Does Not Die*, 69.

and fame, and for me defamation is more than death."[47] As a response to the eroticisation present in LNB, her narrative insists that love cannot be reduced to physical union but must be understood through family, society, and spirituality. This difference is vital. Where Eliade exoticises Indian love as transgressive sensuality, Devi reclaims it as a holistic bond embedded in cultural ethics. Her refusal to accept Eliade's version is also a refusal to let the colonial male gaze define Indian femininity. The idea of the dignity of Indian women becomes stronger in the novel when she writes a letter to a friend, asking her to contradict Eliade's version and imploring her that it is her "duty to uphold the dignity of Indian womanhood."[48] In a manner, this also gives a layer of a nationalist discourse to NH, with Devi assuming an anti-colonialist stance against LNB's position.

H. M. Zahid Iqbal looks at NH from another interesting lens by applying Nirmala Menon's "interrogative hybridity", which builds on Homi Bhabha's theory of hybrid culture.[49] Bhabha's notion of hybridity primarily comes from *The Location of Culture*, where he describes hybrid culture as the space where coloniser and colonised intersect, producing a 'third space' that destabilises rigid colonial binaries like the self/other and coloniser/colonised. It is a dynamic, ambivalent site which is neither fully one culture nor the other, and it can be a space for resistance, mimicry, negotiation, or new forms of identity.[50] According to Iqbal, Menon extends Bhabha's formulation of hybridity by shifting the emphasis from cultural ambivalence to cultural interrogation.[51] While Bhabha highlights hybridity as a space of productive ambiguity where cultural elements intermingle without necessarily unsettling colonial power, Menon stresses its critical edge. In her view, hybridity is not merely a site of negotiation but an interrogative mode that actively questions colonial authority, exposes the limits of dominant narratives, and resists assimilative or benign readings of cultural mixture.

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[47] This particular line is absent from the University of Chicago Press version, which is otherwise the primary edition cited in this article. For the original Bengali version, see Maitreyi Devi, *Na Hanyate* (Kolkata: Prima Publications, 2005), 32.

[48] Devi, *It Does Not Die*, 215.

[49] H. M. Zahid Iqbal, "Revisiting Colonial Encounters in Maitreyi Devi's It Does Not Die: A Romance: A Postcolonial Perspective," *SAGE Open*, 14, no. 2 (2024), 2-11.

[50] Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 1994), 19-40.

[51] Iqbal, "Revisiting Colonial Encounters," 4.

It is a self-aware, disruptive form of hybridity that intervenes in hegemonic discourse rather than simply emerging from cross-cultural contact. *Na Hanyate* offers a strong example of this interrogative hybridity. Grounded in the specific social world of colonial Bengal, it uses everyday cultural encounters not to celebrate fusion but to probe, unsettle, and reverse the assumptions underpinning colonial and patriarchal representations. The novel does not focus on movements between the colonised and the coloniser; instead, it looks at the more intimate cultural negotiations occurring within the Indian society during the colonial period, as Iqbal argues, "being local in setting as well as in content, it does not have any concerns with the questions of migrancy, diaspora or transnational journeys; the prominent features of postcolonial migrants' hybridity."[52]

A central point in Devi's text is its relentless questioning and, by extension, its reversal of colonial stereotypes. Her narrative highlights the prejudiced assumptions held both by British colonisers toward Indians and vice versa, and then dismantles them. In one instance, Devi asserts that some see Western music as "howling of jackals and barking of dogs,"[53] a cliched position held by Indian society which unassumingly reflects the same stance held by Western society regarding Indian music. There is also the point of racism and counter-racism. Eliade in NH tells Devi that the Anglo-Indians do not think very highly of Indians, that they see the Bengalis as uncivilised and have a very strong opinion about themselves being pure and descended from the British. In response, Devi asserts that they, too, as a society, do not shy away from hating the Anglo-Indians, labelling them as "crossbreeds."[54]

This reciprocal prejudice is precisely the kind of cultural dynamic that Menon identifies in her idea of interrogative hybridity, where hybrid encounters do not merely blend traditions but expose, question, and unsettle the colonial and racial assumptions that structure everyday life. It is an important point to note that the community, which itself was suffering from racial prejudices at the hands of colonial rule, was extending that suffering to another community. Devi, however, retains a certain hope to fix and amend this issue, stating that,

[52] Ibid., 2.
[53] Devi, *It Does Not Die*, 28.
[54] Ibid., 87-88.

"I know we hate each other only because we do not know each other."[55] This statement echoes what Bhabha calls the ambivalence of colonial relations, where mimicry, prejudice, attraction, and resentment coexist, creating a fraught but potentially transformative space of cultural negotiation.[56] Moreover, Iqbal argues that Devi's assertion here is that "the prejudiced perceptions will only end if the concerned parties determine to reevaluate and revisit their self-justifying conduct."[57]

Crucially, NH's interrogative hybridity is a gendered text. The novel occupies a private world, bringing forth the voice of a woman doubly marginalised by colonialism and patriarchy. The novel is set during the heyday of anti-colonial movements in India. Being a Bengali household in such a period and especially possessing an elite position in society, Devi and her family, especially her father, had conflicting views regarding the national movement. She reminisces, mirroring the colonial suppression of political voice:

> …my father never encouraged our patriotic zeal. He continuously minimised the exploits of the anarchists and snubbed us when we eulogised their sacrifices... because of father's disapproval, we could take no part in the countrywide enthusiasm that nevertheless stirred us to the depths.[58]

The connection between colonialism and patriarchy is difficult to miss; like colonial powers had suppressed any form of revolution against them, Devi's father forbade her from participating in anti-colonial movements, which Iqbal explains as "being suppressed by patriarchy as well as by colonialism, she is not allowed to make decisions according to her aspirations, so she utilizes the hybrid third space to enunciate her suppressed voice."[59] This makes NH, as opposed to LNB, a critical investigation of the society that she was living in, instead of confining itself to the mores of romantic tragedy. It is again in the ambit of colonialism where Devi observes the cultural conflict between the East and the West, and the former's gradual adoption of the latter in the social

[55] Maitreyi Devi, *It Does Not Die*, 88.
[56] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 85-93.
[57] Iqbal, "Revisiting Colonial Encounters," 6.
[58] Devi, *It Does Not Die*, 33.
[59] Iqbal, "Revisiting Colonial Encounters," 8.

fabric of Bengali households. Due to her father's professional and social position, Devi was no stranger to European visitors at her home, and she observed that given this proximity between East and West, they were gradually getting 'westernised', which, interestingly, was made possible because of her grandmother's passing away, whose decision to shun western-style of dining was 'total' on the account of usage of cutlery instead of using one's hand.[60]

This certainly displays the apparent dissonance between the old, traditional Bengalis and the modern ones. Devi also notes the effort at keeping the household up to date with modern decor to accommodate European visitors, by acquiring furniture from places like Egbert Andrews auction house, and brassworks from Delhi and Kanpur for their "half-westernized, half-orthodox house,"[61] expressing ambivalence towards a cultural shift. To an extent, Devi admits to liking these changes, along with certain English social etiquette such as standing up to greet women;[62] however, her refusal to converse in English with Eliade,[63] insisting on her native language instead, does register a critical assertion of agency and difference even within the context of cross-cultural love. On the whole, these vivid recollections reveal the hybrid, contested terrain of everyday colonial life, precisely the kind of intimate cultural negotiation that her narrative foregrounds. One may consider that this position is neither an uncritical embrace nor a wholesale rejection of colonial influences; rather, it is emblematic of the unstable "third space" that, according to Bhabha, makes possible new subjectivities and disruptions to colonial authority. Iqbal asserts that,

> …this shows how in her response to colonial encounters, 'celebration' and 'confrontation' operate on a simultaneous basis and in this process, colonial ideals also momentarily enchant her and then disappear, paving the way for her divided/hanged self between the two cultures.[64]

[60] Maitreyi Devi, *It Does Not Die*, 23.
[61] Devi, *It Does Not Die*, 31.
[62] Ibid., 31.
[63] Ibid., 101.
[64] H. M. Iqbal, "Revisiting Colonial Encounters," 9.

When read through the framework of interrogative hybridity, NH successfully expands the boundaries of postcolonial literary critique. Unlike LNB, or perhaps in an ironic conjugation, the text interrogates and subverts colonial authority by challenging stereotypes, undermining binary oppositions, and voicing the complexity of hybrid subjectivity. With ambivalence, critique, and negotiation in the foreground—both at the cultural and gendered levels—NH emerges as a powerful counter-narrative to colonial and patriarchal fantasies. As Iqbal suggests, "Devi's imperfect imitation of the colonisers with a difference has enabled her to imprint her distinct thoughts on the phenomenon of colonial encounters."[65] Devi's text embodies the very spirit of interrogative hybridity: a mode of writing and being that is always critical and resistant, while simultaneously being open to radical new configurations of the self and society.

## Autobiography after "The Death of the Author"

Thus far, this essay has looked into LNB and NH, asking a singular question: whether autobiographies, or in this case, semi-autobiographies, could serve as historical archives or not. With the present cases in consideration, the dilemma seems insurmountable; here, one is presented with not one but two semi-autobiographical narratives that do not seem to agree with each other. The contextual dissonance becomes a hindrance when one intends to use these two texts as sources for historiographical writing. And it is within this intent that the texts become an issue, condemning such works to outright rejection. Instead, if one were to look at LNB and NH both within and without their contextual relation, or both as conjoint and standalone works, the problem of historical knowledge becomes less intimidating, marking a shift from empirical comparison to epistemological inquiry. The question then no longer remains which account is 'true,' but how autobiographical narration itself produces and destabilises truth claims.

To begin with, it is futile to look for truth in a work that declares itself to be fictional. Regardless of being inspired or rather leaning on one's true life, finding objective truth in such works distorts the larger concerns of historical writing. Abdullah Mamun argues that "what is truth for one can be an utter

[65] Ibid., 10.

lie for another, and that is why attempting to pursue only 'truth' in these memoirs will not be a productive approach to understanding their narratives deeply."[66] What is important to understand here is that either account. What is important to recognise here is that both accounts may contain elements of truth, even though these truths are mediated by memory, subjectivity, and narrative construction. While Eliade's depiction of a sexual union could be a fabrication, it could be the truth as well. Similarly, Devi's categorical and forceful denial could be a reflection of her anxiety regarding her image and the social and professional repercussions such a portrayal might have carried for her. Thus, instead of searching for which text is true in its personal narration, one can consider both to be valid. One might weigh a statement against the other to reach a decision of truth, but given the circumstances, it will be an exercise in ineffectuality as it will be based on interpretation and the reader's bias, leading to popular accords rather than an objective truth.

While in Chicago, Devi and Eliade came into an agreement that his work would not be translated into English during her lifetime (with a threat of legal action if he were not to keep his word), which happened in 1994, five years after Devi's passing. Later, the University of Chicago Press published the two works together as companion volumes. Setting aside the commercial motivation, the act does seem to diminish the individuality of the texts, reducing them to an interwoven chronicle, stripping away the important historical and cultural discourse. Since neither of the authors was alive to see their works garner a much wider audience than before, and the discussions that followed with the text being read as one continuous account, the whole narrative was left open to all manner of interpretations and alternate readings.

Ronald Barthes wrote that "we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author."[67] Essentially, once a text is written, the author's intentions and personal background no longer control the text's meaning.

[66] Abdullah Al Mamun, "La Nuit Bengali and Na Hanyate: Exploring the Narrative of Cultural Politics and Resistance," *Journal of English Studies* 1, no. 1 (July-December 2023), 26, accessed 16 August, 2025, https://www.isu.ac.bd/assets/backend/pdf/journal/20240227092213.1%20(3).pdf.

[67] Ronald Barthes, "The Death of The Author," *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 148.

Instead, the importance of a work lies with the reader; each reader can interpret the text in their own way, without concern about what the author originally meant. Applying it to Eliade and Devi's texts reveals the tension between a fictional retelling of one's life and claiming it to be autobiographical, for it will have to divorce the authors from their own life's story; a reader's approach to these texts will be to find 'what really happened.' Eliade's later autobiography complements this assertion by complicating the fiction of LNB. Alluding to his candid statement mentioned previously, regarding his hopes being grounded in illusions when it came to the Dasgupta family and his imagined future with Maitreyi, his retrospective confession exposes a clear schism between the narrated and narrating selves, exemplifying Barthes' claim that the autobiographical 'I' is never fixed but reconstructed with each retelling.[68] Eliade's regret thus destabilises the authority of LNB, revealing how fragile and contingent its truth-claims really are.

In an ironic way, the very death of authors and the nature of their texts make Barthes' insight newly useful. It helps mediate the historian's dilemma. As the discussion so far suggests, neither LNB nor NH can be taken as factual records in the conventional sense. LNB tells us less about what Eliade actually did and more about how a European intellectual of the 1930s imagined India, Indian women, and love. Likewise, NH reveals less about the exact details of Devi's romance and more about how a postcolonial Bengali woman in the 1970s reclaimed her voice, resisted Orientalist framings, and asserted dignity. Seen this way, the historical value of these texts is discursive rather than factual. They allow one to study colonial and postcolonial encounters, gendered subjectivity, and the workings of power, not by what they report, but by what they reveal about cultural imagination. Authorial intention becomes less important than the authors' function as cultural signifiers. The task is not to decide what Eliade or Devi 'really meant,' but to examine what their texts generate within culture and history. Read through Barthe's framework, autobiographical fiction becomes evidence not of what happened, but of how individuals and cultures give meaning to what happened. From this perspective, it is reasonable to say that LNB and NH cannot serve as transparent historical documents, but they remain invaluable for understanding how colonial desire, postcolonial resistance, gender, and

[68] Barthes, *Roland Barthes,* 120.

identity were articulated; insights that continue to shape historiography today.

The allure of autobiographies lies in their capacity to bridge the chasm between past actors and present interpreters. As Jaume Aurell observes, these narratives function as 'unconventional history,' challenging traditional historical writing by making personal experience a valid way of understanding the past.[69] Such an approach aligns with modern historical studies, in which storytelling (for lack of a better term) is pivotal to understanding the past. Hayden White argued that history, like literature, is shaped by the narrative choices of the historian.[70] Thus, it cannot be dismissed that personal experiences can be histories as well.

But, despite their value, critics of the subject have warned against relying too heavily on autobiographies as evidence. As mentioned, the foremost limitation of autobiographies is their subjectivity. Traditional historians avoid personal narratives due to the possibility of distortion of memory impacting the event. As noted, the active distortion of the memories done by Eliade was the primary reason for Devi's text, which proves not only memory's subjectivity but its malleability as well. Michel de Certeau's idea of how modern history works, as explained by Gabrielle M. Spiegel,[71] helps understanding why using personal or autobiographical writings as historical evidence is complicated. De Certeau argues that modern history begins when historians separate the past from the present, when the past is treated as something finished, almost like a dead body that can be studied and written about.[72] Historians, therefore, work with what is absent; they write about things that are no longer living. Autobiographical writings, however, do not follow this rule. They bring the past back into the present through memory and emotion. In doing so, they blur the line between what is dead and what is still alive in experience. Because memory and feeling are deeply subjective, they can make the past seem

[69] Jaume Aurell, "Autobiography as Unconventional History: Constructing the Author," *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice* 10, no. 3 (2006): 433–49, accessed October 16, 2025, https://doi.org/10.1080/13642520600816213.

[70] Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 2.

[71] Gabrielle M. Spiegel, "The Task of Historian" accessed October 16, 2025, https://www.historians.org/presidential-address/gabrielle-m-spiegel/

[72] Spiegel, "The Task of Historian".

present again in ways that challenge the historian's need for distance and evidence. Reading such texts as straightforward historical proof can therefore be misleading, since they belong as much to the realm of lived memory as to that of documented history.

Tanya Bomsta argues that "the risk of ignoring an autobiography's status and generic features is that it will be mistakenly read as a transparent, historical, and factual record of someone's life. But autobiography should be read not as biographical fact but as literature, with all its attendant slippery relations to truth."[73] Bomsta's argument regarding the use of personal narratives shifts from historical to pedagogical, as they blend fact with subjective interpretation and artistic narrative, rather than straightforward factual records. Her stance is perhaps an echo of all traditional historians, that "autobiography asks every reader to believe, to adjust our expectations of belief, and, finally, to interpret our lives accordingly."[74] Aurell's position of looking at autobiographical narratives as unconventional sources traces the problems faced by what he calls 'constructionist historians'. He argues,

> They seem unable to overcome the apprehension regarding 'loss of objectivity' that has always affected them. In fact, constructionist autobiographies systematically open with a plea for the reader's pardon for having what might seem to be insolence or audacity in writing a personal testimony.[75]

With due deference to the counterarguments that caution against using subjective accounts as historical evidence, one can argue that to engage with semi-autobiographical texts as archives is to accept that history is not only a matter of what occurred, but also how it is narrated. The contradictions between LNB and NH do not undermine their historical value; rather, they expand the domain of what counts as historical knowledge. In essence, they act as a reminder that memory, fiction, subjectivity, and history are not opposites in the current realm of epistemology, but are intertwined modes of

[73] Tanya Bomsta "Stretching the Truth: Limitations and Possibilities of Autobiography in Education" in *Philosophical Studies in Education* 54, (2023) 91, accessed 16 October 2025, https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1409668.pdf

[74] Bomsta, "Stretching the Truth", 99.

[75] Aurell "Autobiography," 436.

meaning-making. Ultimately, the archival feasibility of such writings lies not with their ability to verify the past but in their capacity to expose the fragility of 'historical truth.' As such, they compel the historian to read the archive itself as a text, which is affective, contingent, and at times incomplete. By embracing interpretive openness while being cautious of the inherent pitfalls such as misunderstanding autobiographies as a straightforward, non-literary, unimaginative record, that might "predispose someone to read it as such, neglecting the necessary interpretive framework that all literature demands,"[76] one does not abandon the pursuit of historical understanding but reimagines it, creating spaces for the plural, the contested, and the intimate within the historical field.

**Author, Archives, Afterlives**

To treat *La Nuit Bengali* (LNB) and *Na Hanyate* (NH) as historical materials is to accept that history is not only a record of events but also a practice of interpreting how those events are narrated. As Nandi Bhatia shows, both texts reveal the cultural, racial, and gendered forces that shaped their authors' lives far more reliably than they document verifiable facts.[77] The contradictions between them, therefore, do not diminish their historical value; they expand it. They remind us that memory, fiction, and subjectivity are not impediments to history but constitutive elements of how individuals made meaning within the colonial world.

The divergent receptions of LNB and NH further shape their place in the archive. Eliade's novel, celebrated early as a 'classic of Romanian literature' and widely translated, gained immediate transnational authority. Its prestige only grew as Eliade rose to prominence as one of the most influential historians of religion of the twentieth century; his position at the University of Chicago, combined with his vast scholarly output and his institutional visibility, retroactively stabilised LNB as an important autobiographical document rather than a contested colonial fiction. New editions of Romanian reprints in the 1950s and 1960s, French and Italian translations, and multiple

[76] Bomsta, "Stretching the Truth," 92.

[77] Nandi Bhatia, "Romantic Transgressions in the Colonial Zone: Reading Mircea Eliade's Bengal Nights and Maitreyi Devi's It Does Not Die," in *South Asian Women in the Diaspora*, ed. Nirmal Puwar and Parvati Raghuram (Oxford: Berg, 2003), 99-112.

English paperbacks kept the work in circulation. In 1988, a French–Romanian film adaptation (*Les Nuits Bengali*), with a young Hugh Grant playing the Eliade figure, further amplified its global reach, introducing the story to audiences unfamiliar with either author. In Romania, France, and the English world, LNB circulated primarily as a tragic cross-cultural romance or a spiritual *Bildungsroman* (literature dealing with the protagonist's formative years or spiritual education), absorbed into a genre of 'East-West love stories' that rose in popularity from the 1960s onward. Its colonial racial politics were rarely addressed and often rendered incidental, overshadowed by Eliade's intellectual prestige, by Orientalist expectations about India, and by publishers' marketing that highlighted exoticism and transcendence rather than structural inequality. As a result, in many literary markets, the novel entered public consciousness largely detached from the political and gendered asymmetries embedded in its narrative.

This interpretive stability fractured dramatically in the mid-1990s. One of the most consequential interventions was Anita Desai's review in *The New Republic* published to mark the University of Chicago Press's paired edition of LNB and NH; Desai described Eliade's novel as "a disturbing mixture of the racial and colonial attitudes of the day and a lush romanticism," and read its obsessive cataloguing of Maitreyi's physicality and its caricatured depiction of her family as symptomatic of the fascist currents that pervaded parts of 1930s Europe.[78] Her review not only reframed the novel for American and European readers, but also ignited a wave of scholarly and public debate, with defenders such as Mac Linscott Ricketts responding immediately to correct what they saw as factual inaccuracies.[79] Yet, regardless of its shortcomings, Desai's critique became a crucial moment in the history of the text's reception —it foregrounded questions of race, colonial desire, and authorial ethics that earlier readers had either ignored or romantically glossed over. In the Anglophone world, especially, her review helped shift LNB from a sentimental cross-cultural romance to a politically fraught artefact, reshaping the terms through which the novel could be read.

[78] Anita Desai, "O Calcutta!," *The New Republic, August* 15, 1994, cited in Mihaela Gligor, "Maitreyi: The Bengali Connection," *Romanian Journal of Indian Studies* 1 (2017): 141-2.

[79] Mihaela Gligor, "Maitreyi: The Bengali Connection," *Romanian Journal of Indian Studies* 1 (2017): 143-5.

By contrast, Devi's work, while recognised in Bengal and translated into several European languages, remained comparatively invisible in Western literary culture until this same 1994 edition. And even then, the pairing itself created a second reception event: reviews, rebuttals, and scholarly disputes that treated NH less as an autonomous literary work and more as a corrective footnote to Eliade. This 'reactive' framing shaped how readers approached Devi, channelling critical attention toward factual adjudication, whether she confirmed or contradicted Eliade's version, rather than toward her reflections on gendered discipline, nationalist domesticity, and the everyday vulnerabilities of elite Bengali womanhood. The disparity between the two narratives becomes particularly visible in the critical reception of the texts in Romania and Bengal. As Mihaela Gligor demonstrates in her essay *Maitreyi: The Bengali Connection*, Romanian discussions of La Nuit Bengali have largely centred on Eliade's literary reputation and on debates surrounding the authenticity of his colonial romance. In contrast, Bengali readers and critics have increasingly foregrounded Maitreyi Devi, not only as the author of *Na Hanyate*, but also as a poet and public intellectual whose work belongs to a longer lineage of women's life-writing and social activism. Gligor was invested in defending Eliade's emotional sincerity and in responding to accusations of racism or fascism, whereas in Bengal, Devi's narrative has been read within a tradition that accords women's autobiographical testimony a particular moral authority and nationalist significance.[80]

As critics such as Gligor and Sriparna Basu suggest, these differing moral and literary investments have shaped the transnational afterlives of the two texts, ensuring that Eliade continues to anchor European discussions of the episode while Devi's work circulates as both a counter-narrative and an important example of Bengali women's writing.[81] Furthermore, Devi's texts' afterlife was also shaped by translation. A comparison between the Bengali *Na Hanyate* and the Chicago English edition, *It Does Not Die* (1994), reveals a telling omission. In the Bengali text, Devi's declaration that 'I am an Indian woman, I have family, future, and fame, and for me defamation is more than death' foregrounds the acute social danger that Eliade's novel posed to her reputation, a theme entirely consistent with the patriarchal pressures that

[80] Ibid., 145-8
[81] Ibid., 146-7

Bhatia analyses.[82] Its absence in English produces a more universalised Devi, less rooted in the gendered codes of honour that structured early-twentieth-century Bengali elite life. This omission exemplifies how translation mediates historical perception, that what disappears in translation can also disappear from the historian's awareness. The broader cultural impact of these works continues to evolve. In India, NH has become part of a local feminist and literary lineage that includes women's autobiographical writing from the nineteenth century onward. Devi's public stature as a poet, cultural activist, and founder of the Council for the Promotion of Communal Harmony, also shaped how the book was received, as a moral, political, and intellectual intervention rather than simply a personal memoir. As Bhatia argues,

> She was no longer the young Maitreyi of 1930 but a respectable grandmother in an upper-class household, a mother-in-law, and a devoted wife. She commanded a position of relative power over her daughter-in-law and other members of the household. At this point, she also understood the impact her book would have on her family and relatives.[83]

Within Romania, LNB has remained entangled in debates over Eliade's political past and the ethics of autobiographical self-fashioning, appearing frequently in discussions of interwar nationalism, the politics of memory, and the responsibilities of intellectuals, a resonance sharpened by the political climate of 1930 itself, the year of the Eliade-Maitreyi relationship, when anti-colonial nationalism, Swadeshi's boycott of Europeans, and the arrests of Gandhi and Nehru made such a cross-cultural romance politically charged and socially transgressive.[84]

Globally, contemporary scholarship on Orientalism, gender, translation, and postcolonial historiography has increasingly turned to the Eliade-Devi pair as a case study in narrative asymmetry, cross-racial intimacy, and the politics of archival authority. Even outside academia, periodic media essays, literary blogs, and online reading communities revisit the pair—usually through the lens of 'he said, she said,' reaffirming how deeply the question of credibility

[82] Bhatia, "Romantic Transgressions," 108-10.
[83] Ibid., 111.
[84] Ibid., 102-3.

shapes their afterlives. Taken together, these layers of memory, narrative form, reception, translation, and contemporary uptake underscore that the historical utility of LNB and NH lies not in their ability to attest to what 'really happened,' but in the worlds of meaning they construct. Following Bhatia, the historian must read these texts not as transparent testimonies but as cultural artefacts shaped by Orientalism, nationalism, patriarchy, and the unequal economies of publication, criticism, and translation. In doing so, the archive itself appears not as a fixed repository of fact but as a dynamic field, affective, uneven, sometimes opaque.

Thus, the afterlives of LNB and NH, how they travelled, how they were received, how they were translated, and how they continue to circulate in scholarship, media, and public discourse, become integral to their historical significance. They invite a form of historical practice attuned to the contested, the plural, and the intimate; one that accepts that 'historical truth' is always contingent, always mediated, and always in the process of being rewritten.

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# An Autonomous Religious Tradition of Dalits in the Pre-colonial Punjab: Exploring Lal Begi/Bala Shahi Tradition through the Colonial Archives

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*The autonomous religious movements of Dalits in Punjab, such as the Ad Dharm movement of the 1920s and 30s and the subsequent Ravidassia movement in the post-colonial era, have been examined as significant markers of Dalit social mobility in Punjab. These movements have been analysed as an outcome of the socio-economic and political changes ushered in by the colonial intervention from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, the migration of Punjabi Dalits abroad and avenues made available due to constitutional frameworks of positive discrimination in the post-colonial era. But the question of Dalit religious autonomy in the pre-colonial period remains largely underexplored. The study of the Lal Begi/ Bala Shahi tradition, associated exclusively with the erstwhile Chuhra community in Punjab, offers crucial insights into the histories of Dalit autonomy and resistance in the pre-colonial period. The Lal Begi/Bala Shahi tradition provided the marginalised community with a framework to reinterpret their social position and assert dignity within a deeply hierarchical society. Through an analysis of myths, oral narratives, and songs preserved in archival material pertaining to the colonial period, this paper examines the Lal Begi/Bala Shahi tradition to investigate the forms of religious expression and resistance prior to colonial transformations, and attempts to highlight how these traditions encoded alternative histories and moral orders that challenged dominant caste ideologies.*

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**Keywords:** Religion, Dalits, Autonomy, Lal Beg, Chuhras

## Introduction

Religion has been interpreted in diverse ways in scholarly discourse, ranging from being fundamental to human existence to being a mechanism to keep the common folk bound within the given socio-economic structures. Yet throughout history, one comes across many moments in which the efforts for social change have also taken the guise of religious movements. In the Indian context, the most commonly discussed paths for social mobility for the Dalits are Sanskritisation and religious conversions. However, with regard to Punjab, the scholarship has also focused on other strategies, notably the rise of

autonomous religious movements of Dalits in an attempt to dissociate themselves from the 'dominant' religions. The Ad Dharm movement of the 1920s and 30s was a major Dalit movement aimed at asserting a separate religious identity, as well as ensuring special political rights within the colonial government. In the post-colonial times, efforts were made to rejuvenate the Ad Dharm sentiment, but the focus was more on the figure of Guru Ravidas, which subsequently evolved into an assertion for a separate religion based on veneration of the medieval saint. This sentiment was fiercely expressed in the aftermath of the killing of Sant Rama Nand of Dera Sach Khand Ballan in Vienna in 2009. This assertion has been studied as a consequence of the socio-economic and political changes ushered in by colonial intervention from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, the migration of Punjabi Dalits abroad, and the postcolonial constitutional frameworks of positive discrimination.[1] However, the question that needs to be addressed is what was transpiring during the pre-colonial period, and whether Dalits had completely succumbed to the 'upper'-caste domination.

One of the reasons for the rapid expansion of Islam in the Indian subcontinent is attributed to the caste oppression and discrimination that was inherent in its social system, significantly rooted in Brahmanical ethos.[2] Similarly, among other reasons, the following that Sikhism enjoyed is attributed to the inclusion of the Shudra and 'untouchable' castes within the Sikh fold. Apart from these 'major' religions, the Punjabi society and its popular culture were laden with diverse and fluid religious traditions like Gugga Pir, Sakhi Sarvar, Udasis, Nath Jogis, various *pirs*, *devis*, *sants* and *gurus*, alongside the worship of ancestors and spirits. These traditions kept the doors open for the Dalits and gave them avenues to express their religiosity outside of established social hierarchies. The studies on Punjab history, especially pertaining to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, have shown how the changes

[1] See Mark Juergensmeyer, *Religion as Social Vision: The Movement against Untouchability in 20th Century Punjab* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1982); Ronki Ram, "Beyond Conversion and Sanskritisation: Articulating an Alternative Dalit Agenda in East Punjab," *Modern Asian Studies* 46, no. 3 (2012): 639–702, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X11000254.

[2] Peter Hardy, "Modern European and Muslim explanations of conversion to Islam in South Asia: A preliminary survey of the literature," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 109, no. 02 (1977): 187-88, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0035869X00133866; Zawwar Hussain Zaidi, "Conversion to Islam in South Asia: Problems in Analysis," *American Journal of lslamic Social Sciences* 6, no. 1 (1989): 111, https://doi.org/10.35632/ajis.v6i1.2835.

induced by the colonial intervention, the new print culture, various religious reform movements and ensuing communalism actively worked to replace the syncretic culture and fluid religious traditions of people and make way for the new kind of clearly demarcated and well-defined religious sensibilities.[3] Nevertheless, it still remains debatable as to what extent these religious traditions were successful, or even aimed at addressing the concerns of the Dalits.

But did the Dalits have any recourse to autonomy in religious expression independent of the gruelling influence of dominant castes in pre-colonial times, or did the cultural paraphernalia of the times limit Dalits to express their religiosity in the above-mentioned frameworks alone? The study of a unique religious tradition that was exclusive to the erstwhile Chuhra[4] community (now identified as Mazhabi Sikhs or Balmikis), viz., veneration of Lal Beg, Bala Shah or Balmik, can be helpful in examining the histories of Dalit autonomy and resistance through the expressions of religion and culture. Although owing to limitations of resources and the prevailing caste oppression, the markers of their faith were never loud, but a major following of the tradition has been recorded in northern India, including Punjab.

This paper analyses a corpus of myths, narratives and songs of the Chuhra community, to trace how these cultural and spiritual articulations were put to use by the community, to assert a distinct and autonomous religious identity. These narratives, as we will see, articulate aspirations of the oppressed for liberation and justice, ultimately oriented towards the promise of salvation on the Judgement Day. By investigating these stories and songs, the paper attempts to analyse and understand Dalit responses to their abject position in society, by emphasising the defiance of the predominant discourses by the oppressed communities.

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[3] See Kenneth W. Jones, *Arya Dharm: Hindu Consciousness in 19th-Century Punjab* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976); Harjot Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994); Anshu Malhotra, *Gender, Caste and Religious Identities: Restructuring Class in Colonial Punjab* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[4] The term is employed as documented in archival sources concerning the community, with no disrespect implied.

The resource material used in this paper is from the archives pertaining to the colonial period, as it is difficult to find written materials from pre-colonial times which mention this religious tradition of Chuhras. The official documentation or literary texts of pre-colonial times seem rarely invested in documenting this non-conformist tradition of Dalits. Also, owing to the social condition of the Chuhras, the possibility of literacy among them and hence the documentation of the tradition by the community members themselves was quite bleak. We are therefore condemned to rely on the material of colonial times to gain insights into this fascinating tradition. Even though being cautious of the perils of using the colonial material and its shortcomings, one must acknowledge the arduous efforts of the ethnographers and missionaries who meticulously recorded the songs and oral narratives of the Chuhras, whatever may have been their motives, especially when there is a dearth of material.

## *"Lal Beg hai Chuhreyan khasian da"* (Lal Beg is of Chuhras)

The Chuhras were placed at the margins of the caste-ridden society. Although considered impure and untouchable, they were essential for the functioning of social life. Besides scavenging and sweeping (carrying night soil), they were engaged in a variety of works. They constituted the majority of agricultural labourers and also helped manage cattle and handled manure work. They were also found among the ranks of soldiers and were expected to perform other customary village jobs like carrying news of death, digging up graves, etc. But the colonial ethnographers and government identified them as associated with menial jobs and dubbed it majorly as a scavenging community.[5]

The dominant discourses usually project the Dalit communities as ungodly people who were brought to God and civility primarily through religious reforms undertaken by the oppressor castes and Christian missionaries. But a deeper probe into the social and religious past of these communities presents a different picture. The Chuhra community had a unique religious tradition, distinct from the dominant religions. This tradition was centred on veneration of ancestors or preceptor saints, known by various names such as Lal Beg, Bala

[5] Denzil C. J. Ibbetson, *Report on the Census of the Panjab taken on the 17th February 1881.* vol. 1 (Calcutta: The Superintendent of Government Printing, 1883), 318-19.

Shah, Balmik and others. The lore about the preceptors that were revered by the community illuminates some very compelling aspects of their religious life.

The tradition of worship of Lal Beg and others is centuries old. Its reference is also found in the famous text *Heer,* written by Waris Shah around the mid-eighteenth century:

> *Sarvar Sakhi hai Bhraiyan sevkan da,*
> *Lal Beg hai Chuhreyan khasian da*[6]
>
> While *Sarvar Sakhi* is (the guru) of *Bhraiyan sevaks* (servants),
> *Lal Beg* is of Chuhras.
>
> [Translation by the author]

The tradition was subsequently recorded comprehensively when the British started ethnographic surveys in India. The decennial censuses, the accounts of ethnographers and folklorists, various journals and other material testify to the veneration of Lal Beg, Bala Shah, Balmik and others exclusively among the Chuhras.

## The Fantastic World of Lal Begis

The lore surrounding the origins of the community and its revered saints can be loosely divided into two broader categories. The first category provides narratives around the birth of the revered ancestor-saint, in most cases Lal Beg, Bala Shah, or Balmik, or the story of his condemnation to the work of sweeping or scavenging. The second category is *Kursinamas,* which are generally genealogies or accounts of the lineages of the revered saints. However, the nature of these narratives is not rigid; it is quite flexible, diverse and varies from place to place. Within this tradition, various ancestors or preceptors known as Jhaumpra, Kalak Das, Pir Jhouna and others were also revered, sometimes as part of a lineage or as *avatars* (incarnations) of Lal Beg or Bala Shah.

[6] Waris Shah, *Heer Waris Shah* (Amritsar: Kashmir Printing Press, 1985), 196.

Durkheim, while discussing the purpose of the science of religion, says:

> But we must know how to reach beneath the symbol to grasp the reality it represents, and that gives the symbol its true meaning. The most bizarre or barbarous rites and the strangest myths translate some human need and some aspect of life, whether social or individual. The reasons the faithful settle for in justifying those rites and myths may be mistaken, and most often are; but the true reasons exist nonetheless, and it is the business of science to uncover them.[7]

These stories generally point to the attempt by the members of the Chuhra community to build an explanation or a rationale for their present position in society. The marginalised community is not at peace with the enforced low social status, where the menial task of scavenging or sweeping has been enforced upon them. These narratives are attempts to construct a past where they held high social status or were at least equals with others, and to find or construct a rationale or justification for their present circumstances.

## I. Claim to 'High' Birth

> *Pehle jug Brahma, Liya autara.*
> *Bete san Brahme de, Pure chara.*
> *Mathe tikka dharm da, Gal janiyun mala…*
>
> In the first age, Brahma became incarnate.
> Brahma had sons, four children.
> They had the sacred mark on the forehead, the sacred thread and rosary on the neck.[8]

So the venerated progenitor of the Chuhra community is placed in a distant past where a noble origin is ascribed to him. In one narrative[9], he is Jhaumpra, one of the four sons of Brahma, born when he took an *avatar* on earth in the

[7] Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life,* trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 2.

[8] John W. Youngson, "The Chuhras," *The Indian Antiquary* 35 (1906), 350

[9] Ibid.

First Age[10]. The ancestor-saint Jhaumpra bears a *tilak* (sacred mark) on his head and a *janeu* (sacred thread) across his shoulders. Both are symbols of 'upper' caste ritual purification.[11] In another narrative,[12] he is Nakul (*Bal-nek,* i.e., 'good lad' and hence *Balnik*), one of the famous five Pandavas of the Mahabharata tradition. Here one can see borrowings from wider 'Hindu'[13] traditions. But a deep influence of Abrahamic religions can also be observed. In one version[14], the ancestor-saint is Prophet Ilias[15] of Abrahamic religious traditions.

By imagining a noble past and ascribing 'high' birth to the ancestor-saint, a dignified ancestry is claimed by the community members, although the symbols of dominant castes are adhered to make these claims. By doing so, the imposed low social status and the almost 'natural' association of the Chuhra community with the menial tasks of scavenging is put to challenge, or rather denied.

## II. The Social Descent

The decline in social status of the community is ascribed to some unfortunate incidents involving the ancestor-saint or things put to action by the will of God. Generally, the stories speak of a crisis that emerges when a cow dies, and the task of removing the dead carcass generates a conflict among the brothers, who are either the sons of Brahma or the Pandava brothers. The imposition of this menial job is attributed to the cunningness of siblings who trick the ancestor-saint or the progenitor of the community to do the task, with the

[10] This is in reference to the Puranic conception of the four *Yugas* (ages) that are *Satyuga*, *Tretayuga, Dvaparyuga* and *Kaliyuga*.

[11] *Janeu* is a sacred thread worn around the upper body. In Brahmanical Hindu tradition, it is an exclusive right of the upper three *varnas* who are also called the *Dvijas* or the 'twice born'. *Upnayana* ceremony is conducted after which the male *Dvija* bears the *janeu*.

[12] W. Crooke, *The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh,* vol. 1 (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1896; reprint ed., New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1999), 262.

[13] The usage of the term Hindu invites a debate in itself. The term is used here to loosely refer to the umbrella term which includes Vedic and post-Vedic traditions, Puranic traditions and all that it came to encompass in the 'modern' period.

[14] R. C. Temple, "Lal Beg–Lal Bhekh–Mehtar Ilias–Pir-i Dastagir," *Punjab Notes and Queries* 1, no. 7 (1884), 73

[15] Prophet Ilias is also known as Prophet Elijah and was sent to guide people of Israel to abandon the worship of Baal and turn to the only true God.

assurance to take him back into the family. But once the task is done, they shun him away with a far-fetched promise to accept him back in the Fourth Age, i.e., the Kaliyuga, or they just move on, leaving him behind. Here, the resentment of the marginalised is sufficiently visible; the onus and blame for their present deplorable social and economic conditions is put on the cunningness of the dominant castes, who are imagined as the progeny of shrewd brothers of these tales.

Seemingly, in these narratives, the logic for the imposition of low status on the Chuhra community and for their ostracization does not betray the Brahmanical notions of purity and pollution. As per Brahmanical notions, the task of scavenging is not only considered menial and disgusting but is also rendered "impure", thereby imposing the curse of untouchability on the person (or rather the whole community) involved. The term 'untouchable' has its implications in terms of the dichotomy of pure-impure, where the Chuhra community was considered ritually impure as a consequence of their association with the occupation of the scavenging imposed on them. It is because Bal Nek (or Jhaumpra in the other story) had been tricked into performing the task of removing the carcass of the dead cow that he was rendered unclean by his siblings and hence, shunned as an outcast. But this association of ritual impurity with the task of scavenging is also challenged in these stories.

To affect this dissociation, reliance is placed upon divine injunction, thus removing the stigma of impurity associated with the job of scavenging. It is declared that when the animal has died, according to the will of God, the job of removing its body remains beyond defilement.

> *Gao de utte aake, Allah masland lagai,*
> *Chitthi likhke hath, Bale Pir de pharai.*
> *Tu ihnun sutna, ih tainu aai.*
> *Ihnun kaun haraam akhda? Main takbir chalai.*
>
> Coming near the cow, the Lord sat on His throne.
> He wrote a letter and gave it into the hands of Bala Pir.
> You must throw her away, this task is on you.

Who dares to call it unclean when I killed it?[16]

In other narratives, this shrewdness or trickery of brothers is replaced with intervention by God, where the ancestor-saint and his descendants are offered a seat in heaven for the job.

In the stories inspired from Abrahamic religious traditions, a different type of narrative is woven. In one version,[17] Prophet Ilias is punished to sweep around the world as a punishment for spitting (though not intentionally, he rather intended to avoid it) on fellow prophets sitting in the court of the Almighty God. This fallen prophet and his progeny would be liberated by the promised Messiah, i.e., Lal Beg, who is born with the blessings of a famous Sufi mystic of the 11th or 12th century and the founder of the Qadirriya Sufi order, Sayyid Abdul Qadir Jilani.

In another version,[18] the ancestor-saint is Balmikji, who was created by the Almighty and was placed on duty to sweep the stairs of the heavenly throne. As a reward for his service, Almighty God created Lal Beg, alias Nuri Shah Bala, who would be the Guru of all the Chuhras. In this narrative, the task of sweeping is not imagined as degrading or menial. Rather, the task of sweeping the stairs of the heavenly throne is an act of service to the Almighty and is rewarding too.

## III. The Miraculous Warrior-Saints

The recorded narratives show that while the manoeuvres of the dominant castes were detrimental to the Chuhras, as they resulted in the loss of noble or equal status, they are not crestfallen or passive in their present circumstances. With devotion towards their ancestor-saints and having complete faith in their miraculous powers, they remember heroic tales of theirs which pass on through generations.

[16] Youngson, "The Chuhras (1906)," 350.

[17] Temple, "Lal Beg–Lal Bhekh–Mehtar Ilias–Pir-i Dastagir," 73.

[18] F. G. Delmerick, "Lal Beg-Balmikji-Valmiki," *Punjab Notes and Queries* 1, no. 4 (1884), 37.

In some stories[19], Balnik is imagined as an old, revered saint of Ghazni who had miraculous powers and could also grant children to the 'barren' parents. His chief disciple, Lal Beg, was also very powerful who conquered the kingdoms of Kabul and Kashmir. But Lal Beg did not sit on the throne and came to Thanesar, where his master Balnik died. Then he came to Delhi and founded the Lal Begi religion. His disciples were further classed into five sects.

In another version, Walmik[20] took Lal Beg to Benaras (Kashi), where 96 crore *devtas* (probably dominant-caste persons) resided and had displaced the sweepers from the city and confined them in Chandalgarh at a distance from Benaras. Even their sight was considered polluting, and they had to sound drums to announce their entry and exit from the city so that they would not be seen by the *devtas*. The ancestor-saint Walmik performed his final miracle to teach a lesson to the dominant castes and end this injustice. He renounced his body, and blood and matter started flowing from his body so that no dominant caste person would touch it. They called the sweepers for the job. But the body kept resurfacing again and again. Later, Walmik appeared in a dream to a dominant caste person, and warned him that the body would not leave the city, unless they agreed to see the sweepers. This is how Walmik put an end to the 'unseeability' of the sweepers of the region. The sweepers then took his body to Chandalgarh, and as it reached there, the legend says that the mat huts turned into houses of gold.

## IV. Salvation and Moral Reckoning

The divisions of caste are not linear, and the caste hierarchy is quite complex. In this system of graded inequality[21], the Chuhras were regarded as lowest

[19] R. C. Temple, "A Story of Lal Beg-Lalbegi Sects," *Panjab Notes and Queries* 1, no. 10 (1884), 109.

[20] R. C. Temple, "Lal Beg-Walmik-Benares-Chandalgarh," *Panjab Notes and Queries* 1, no. 8 (1884), 85. The spellings used are as given in the recorded account.

[21] B. R. Ambedkar has described the concept of graded inequality as follows "...the Caste system has two aspects. In one of its aspects, it divides men into separate communities. In its second aspect, it places these communities in a graded order one above the other in social status. Each caste takes its pride and its consolation in the fact that in the scale of castes it is above some other caste. As an outward mark of this gradation, there is also a gradation of social and religious rights, technically spoken of as Ashtadhikaras and Sanskaras. The higher the grade of a caste, the greater the number of these rights; and the lower the grade, the lesser

among the low, even among the Dalits and thus were burdened by the structural injustices of all 'above' them. Under these circumstances, the prospects of open rebellion may remain a deferred possibility. Also, in a society where conceptions of *karma* and *moksha* have been deeply rooted in the collective consciousness of the public, the pursuit of liberation is 'naturally' relocated beyond this worldly existence. In the Lal Begi/Bala Shahi tradition, the resentment against the oppression finds expression, and justice is sought on the apocalyptic Judgement Day.

At the Judgement Day,[22] Lal Beg, who is either the powerful warrior-saint and disciple of Balnik/Walmik (the miraculous saint of Ghazni) or who was created by Almighty God or who was born by the blessings of Sayyid Abdul Qadir Jilani, would appear to end the punishment meted out to the fallen Prophet Mehtar Ilias and to liberate the Chuhras by interceding for them before Almighty God. A tale recounts that the ancestor-saint Jhaumpra was reluctant to remove the dead carcass at first, as he was well aware of the dire consequences which would follow. Then he was assured of the ultimate reward for the task by the Almighty God that, on the Judgement Day, he and his progeny would readily be accepted in Heaven while the others would suffer.

It would be interesting to mention an anecdote recorded by Delmerick. He describes the dire trust of Chuhras in the power and status of their ancestor-saints. He mentions that he enquired with an enthusiastic and proud sweeper, who was sure that only followers of Lal Beg would be saved on the Judgement Day, if any other community stood a chance. He hesitatingly replied, "Yes, there is a small chance in favour of Muhammadans who practically, although unwittingly, invoke the name of the Lal Guru in their creed by saying *la ilaha ill illaho* (there is no god but God)."[23]

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their number." B. R. Ambedkar, "Annihilation of Caste," in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches.* vol. 1 (New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2014), 72.

[22] The conception of Judgement Day originated in ancient Zoroastrianism and was adopted and developed by Abrahamic faiths like Judaism, Christianity and Islam. According to these traditions, it is the day at the end of the world when God will judge all humanity.

[23] F. G. Delmerick, "La Ilaha Ill' Illaho-Sweepers," *Panjab Notes and Queries* 1, no. 6 (1884), 61

## Songs of Defiance, Autonomy and Assertion

In the pre-colonial Punjab, Dalits were socially and economically oppressed. However, the relations of caste were not static, and challenges had been posed to Brahmanism (and casteism) from time to time. The anti-caste movements of modern times have utilised various opportunities made available by the circumstances of the times. The avenues created by economic and political reforms by the colonial government had a role to play in these movements. But when these tools of 'modernity' were not available, how would the resistance of the oppressed or their assertion have been expressed? Sharma argues,

> while the ritually low castes and untouchables, as a community, were engaged in economic conflict, at various levels, with the ritually high-caste landowners, which also resulted in occasional uprisings, the popular belief system was used as catharsis as well as instrument of assertion of their power against social coercion.[24]

The community members used to sing various songs during worship, while performing rituals and at other cultural occasions. These songs served a variety of purposes. Besides working as a medium to venerate their ancestor-saints, providing origin narratives and serving as repositories of community knowledge to be passed on to next generations, these songs act as a means to express the resentment of the community members and desire for justice. They tried to imagine a different set of notions which defied the Brahmanical concepts of religiosity and social conduct.

> *Na main vartan Ashtmi, Na tur Makke jana,*
> *Alla Alif saman da, Sabho ih biyan*
>
> I will not observe Ashtami, Nor will I go to Mecca,
> Allah, who is like Alif, Permitted this.[25]

[24] Mahesh Sharma, "Symbols of Empowerment: Possession, Ritual and Healers in Himachal Himalaya (North India)," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 45, no. 2 (2010): 198, https://doi.org/10.1177/0021909609357413.

[25] Youngson, "The Chuhras (1906)," 351.

Pilgrimage is a significant aspect of religious traditions around the world. Rather, in a sense, the development of pilgrimage sites plays a role in the establishment of a religion. But in the songs of Chuhras, one can observe not just a conscious distancing from the practice of pilgrimage, but there is an unapologetic denial to follow those practices:

> *Jeon Hindu Ganga nu parsann, Jeon Makka Mussalmanan,*
> *Shahi naam tere nun mannan, Pind pind than banavan,*
> *Batti tel chiragi paavan, Teri jot jagaavan,*
> *Nikki vaddi hon jamatan, Ao sis nivaavan*
>
> The Ganges Hindus fear, and Muslims make their weary pilgrimage to Mecca far.
> But your Shahis love and build thee unnumbered shrines o'er all the crowded land.
> Thy lamps they light, while great and small bow down in lowly reverence to worship thee.[26]

In the above excerpt of a song, one could observe a sense of ridicule and mockery towards the biggest symbols of Hindu and Muslim pilgrimage practices, which are significant aspects of the respective religions. There is a comment on the supposed ignorance of followers of these religions who are unable to comprehend the 'true nature' of God. The stress on the practice of pilgrimage by the dominant religious traditions is contrasted by a realisation of the omnipresence of God among the Chuhras. The Bhakti and Sufi traditions attracted large numbers of devotees in medieval times. The religious orthodoxy and intermediary priestly classes (as between the devotee and God) were severely criticised. Following the similar notions as those of Bhakti saints, the Lal Begis or Bala Shahis stress the importance of *naam*.[27] The Shahis (followers of Bala Shah), who are aware of His omnipresence, build the *thaan* (shrines) in every village possible. For a long time, various religious

[26] Ibid., 343.

[27] As per the *Bhakti* ethos, the recitation of *Naam* (name of the Lord) is considered more superior to other paths for salvation. Its importance was stressed upon by various *Bhakti* saints. It is the most accessible path for common folk as compared to elaborate and expensive Brahmanical rituals and *Jnan* (as in scriptural knowledge) path which were restricted for oppressed communities.

establishments had denied entry to Dalits.[28] Where the discriminatory practice of denying entry to Dalits at sacred spaces of dominant communities was prevalent, the followers of Bala Shah boast the 'fact' that their deity is revered by the high and the low alike, and anyone could come and pay respect to their deity, thus instilling a sense of egalitarianism.

The Chuhras had been despised by the dominant religious establishments, if not dominant religions. Instead of feeling dejected, they sought to build a religious tradition of their own. Fuelled by the enthusiasm, they project their ancestor-saints as being superior to preceptors or religious figures of other traditions. The claim of Bala Shah on heaven is asserted over and over in the songs that suggest that Bala Shah is the supreme of all, whose flag flies high in Heaven:

> *Ethe othe duin jahanan,*
> *Baur Baleya shera, mera kar kasmana,*
> *Vich bihshti jhanda tera, jhulda lal nishana.*
>
> O Bala brave, and there in both the worlds, for us.
> Thy red flag flies high in heaven. 'Tis red! Behold!
> It waves triumphantly on high. Mid both the worlds, let us keep this with Faith.[29]

The faithful conveys one's own firm commitment to be on his side, remaining content in thick and thin. Again, the superiority of their deity is asserted by calling him the greatest of all and everyone's Guru:

> *Oh de passe rahanga, ja karan guzara.*
> *Tuhathon vadda ih hai, Baba humara.*
> *Sab da guru sadaunda, Rakhisvar bhara*
>
> With him I go, with him I lodge, with him I live and die.
> Our father is the best and greatest of you all, a leader bold.

[28] While various religious establishments allowed entry for Dalits after arduous struggles that too only during the last century, still this prohibition on entry for Dalits is practiced at various religious centres.

[29] Youngson, "The Chuhras (1906)," 344.

Named mighty man of God.[30]

Their discourse reflects a pronounced sense of righteousness, with the songs reinforcing the community's self-worth by depicting their saints as superior to those of the dominant religions. The community, which was forced to engage in the undignified work of scavenging and faced humiliation on a daily basis due to their social status, expressed its resentment and anger against this social set-up by delegitimising the social and religious beliefs of dominant castes and their ensuing regretful fate on the Judgment Day. A sense of justice is sought at the end when the oppressed would be rewarded with Heaven, and exploiters would be shunned to Hell:

*Ram te Rahim kian, Chhap chhap jana,*
*Sava neze te din avega, Haoe dozakh pana.*
*Par bihisht banake, Samhne vikhana.*
*Ummat teri bhajj ke, Bhishti var jana.*

The followers of Ram and Rahim, will hide themselves then,
When the height of the sun comes down to a Spear and a quarter, I will send them to Hell.
Making paradise beyond, I will show it to you.
Your followers running, will enter Heaven.[31]

Then comes the assertion that the religion of Chuhras is the 'true religion'. It comes with a fair warning that those Shahis who will choose to go into the Mohammedan fold will be left without any faith. Even those who would turn to the fold of Baba Nanak (i.e. Sikhism) would also be rejected. Only those who follow Bala Pir will be accepted for a place in Heaven.

*Das avatar us auna duniya te shaan,*
*dassi avatar usse de agge, main japnan naam.*
*Chuhre Kalak Das da majhab hai tamam.*
*Jehra Shahi kalma parhega Muhammad da, oh beiman.*
*Jehre parhnge Baba Nanak da, oh bhi nai parwaan.*
*Jehre parhenge Bale Pir da dargahe pawaan.*

[30] Ibid., 345.
[31] Ibid., 351.

Ten times told he will become incarnate, bringing glory to the world.
In all the ten, His name I will proclaim.
The faith of Kalak Das, the Chuhra is a perfect faith.
If any Shahi read Muhammad's creed, an unbeliever he is branded;
And if Baba Nanak's he shall be rejected;
All that do profess the creed of Bala Pir, straight to heaven shall go.[32]

## Making Sense of the Lore

It is a well-established pattern that dominant communities strategically invoke culture, memory, and narrative to embed themselves within broader meta-narratives of domination. On the other hand, there are myriad responses by the oppressed communities to their subjugation, from organised rebellion to various subtle forms of everyday resistance.

Through the various stories, myths and songs, the Chuhras assert a claim to their dignity in the present by defying the prevailing dominant cultural norms that relegate them to their present deplorable circumstances. The dominant discourse projects social exclusion as their fate. But there is no passive acceptance of this idea. Instead, it is marked by resentment and further resistance against it, which is reflected through these narratives. There is an attempt to find a rationale, or rather build a justification behind the present circumstances of the community where the menial task of scavenging or sweeping has been enforced upon them. Sometimes it is ascribed to being the punishment for the "Original Sin" of the fallen Prophet, and sometimes as a divine ordinance or even trickery by the oppressor castes. The community has long been denied dignity and power, but its narratives often imagine a potent saint or messianic figure whose authority is unassailable and before whom even the oppressors ultimately stand powerless. On Judgment Day, he would present himself to advocate their cause. They strengthen their identities through the construction and propagation of stories of their inception, attesting to their history while simultaneously explaining the reasons, events and accidents responsible for their current status and striving for the path to liberation, by whatever possible means.

[32] John W. Youngson, "The Chuhras," *The Indian Antiquary* 36, (1907), 29.

Resistance often invokes organised rebellion; some clandestine activity, acts of espionage, sabotage, and/or guerrilla attacks. But the response of an oppressed and stigmatised community by "building trenches of resistance and survival on the basis of principles different from, or opposed to, those permeating the institutions of society"[33] is no less significant as a form of resistance. The construction of a separate identity exclusive from the framework of oppression and refusal to be evaluated according to its values and ethics must be seen as resistance, a political act. It is necessary, to use Castells' expression, "the exclusion of the excluders by the excluded."[34]

The effort to redefine their place in society led the Chuhra community to construct an alternative belief system distinct from that of their oppressors. In doing so, they creatively employed diverse cultural resources that were available to them to express and negotiate their aspirations. They drew from various cultural and religious traditions, gathered fragments and reworked myth and imagination into weaving their own narratives. One can easily mark inspirations or borrowings from the dominant religious traditions. The concept of *Dashavtaras,* i.e., the ten incarnations, along with that of the Four Ages, mythological characters like Brahma, the five Pandavas, are generic to the wider 'Hindu' tradition; the concepts like Sin, Judgement Day, etc., are inspired by Abrahamic religious traditions.

Besides the myths and narratives in songs and stories, the claims of autonomy of the Lal Begi/Bala Shahi tradition can be qualified from the prevalence of fascinating rites and rituals of worship and practice of building shrines called *thaan* numerously in every village or settlement of the Chuhras. The construction of the shrine to Bala Shah or Lal Beg is quite interesting. In the place where the shrine was to be made, materials like knives of gold, silver and copper, a goat head, and a coconut were wrapped in a red cloth and buried. Then the shrine was created above it. It was quite a simplistic structure made of mud or bricks. It resembles what is common practice in Punjab of making *marhis* for ancestors, a small structure with a niche for lighting a lamp inside it. The platform may be raised in some places, and a *thada* (surrounding space is enclosed) was created with the capacity to accommodate a few

[33] Manuel Castells, *The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture,* vol. 2, *The Power of Identity,* 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 8.

[34] Ibid., 9.

devotees. The shrines in eastern regions of the Indian subcontinent had a relatively complex structure consisting of five mud domes (four at corners and one at the centre) on a raised platform, even though the structure was small in size. On various occasions, the ancestor-saint was worshiped, and *choorma* (a dish made of bread, ghee and jaggery) was distributed. On special occasions, the sacrifice of a goat or cock, according to the ability of the devotee, was made and then feasted on by the community members.[35]

This tradition must be seen as distinct from dominant religions like Hinduism and Islam. The Lal Begis or Bala Shahis claim an autonomous belief system, which must be perceived as a conscious act on the part of the community to assert a separate religious identity and therefore a possible rejection of the dominant social structure. This autonomous tradition, however, was fraught with complexities owing to the social position of the community and the lack of economic resources. Existence of such a transgressive tradition among the oppressed sections of society would conceivably provoke anxieties and tensions. When R. C. Temple was collecting folklores of Punjab, he complained of the secrecy maintained by the Chuhras. They never fully disclosed details of their religion. He was never able to obtain "the whole book", which he was told was in possession of a guru or spiritual guide who was in another town at a distance from the examinee[36]. On the other hand, Weitbrecht, while describing the 'simple' method by which the Chuhras revere their ancestor-saint, makes a comment on the inconspicuousness of the markers of this tradition. He says:

> The bamboo and the rag are almost always short, unlike that which faqirs[37] put up; the reason being I presume, that the higher castes would

[35] For more details see Youngson, "The Chuhras (1906)," 340; Joel Lee, "Lal Beg underground: The passing of an "untouchable" god," in *Objects of Worship in South Asian Religions: Forms, Practices and Meanings*, ed. Knut A. Jacobsen, Mikael Aktor and Kristina Myrvold (London: Routledge, 2015), 148; Monica Sabharwal, "(Re)Negotiating Caste Identities: Understanding the Response of the *Balmiki* Community during the Colonial Period," *Journal of Social Inclusion Studies* 8, no. 2 (2022), 233, https://doi.org/10.1177/23944811221127351 .

[36] R. C. Temple, *The Legends of the Panjab,* vol. 1 (Bombay: Education Society's Press, 1884), 530.

[37] Possibly Weitbrecht is using this term to point to shrines of popular Sufi saints who enjoyed a large following across Punjab irrespective of caste or religious affiliations.

> not allow the degraded Chuhra to manifest too prominent a symbol of his faith. For the rest, Chuhras are very much under influence of Hindu or Muhammadan religious ideas, according to the religion of the masters whom they serve.[38]

These contentions may have been dampened down by the dominant castes being satisfied with Chuhras toning down the outward loudness of their faith and operating somewhat discreetly, as observed by Temple and Weitbrecht. Another strategy appears to be the Chuhras conforming to the traditions of the dominant or oppressor at the outset, while believing firmly in their own traditions.

## Conclusion

One may contest the significance of this tradition in the everyday lives of Dalits, where justice or liberation is sought only posthumously, but one must keep in mind the socio-economic and cultural circumstances of those times. Presently, owing to changes in colonial and post-colonial times, when new avenues are available for Dalits, they have succeeded in securing social mobility (to whatever limited extent), and the assertion has become louder and more visible. Unlike today, in those times, these avenues were far from reach, rather far from imagination. Also, there was much less scope for opportunities to acquire resources and power for a militant opposition autonomously. This tradition was one of the various methods by which Dalits had expressed their protest. These myths, lore, and songs are not mere figments of imagination but also a reflection of dreams, aspirations and the identity of the community. These expressions ought to be seen as alternate epistemological frameworks that challenge the established knowledge about oppressed communities. In doing so, one ought to understand these in terms of resistance against dominant frameworks of thought that seek to define a community within a certain paradigm and also as attempts to legitimise their claims to dignity in the past as well as present.

The significance of this form of assertion can also be appreciated from the fact that it was widespread in Northern India, and when the British started their

[38] H. U. Weitbrecht, "Panjab-The Chuhras-Lal Beg," *Indian Notes and Queries* 4, no. 47 (1887): 203

surveys, they could record the prevalence of this tradition from Punjab in the north-west to Bengal in the east. The extent of the spread of Lal Begi/Bala Shahi tradition speaks of its success in providing a spiritual framework to the most downtrodden section of society. Also, the established notion of Sankritisation that oppressed communities just mimic norms of the dominant does not seem absolute. The case of Lal Begi/Bala Shahi tradition shows that the oppressed communities, subject to their socio-economic conditions, attempt to create their own religious frameworks as distinct from established religions, where they imagine hope and assert their righteousness in an attempt to overcome worldly injustice in the spiritual world.

The Lal Begi/Bala Shahi tradition presents an interesting case study in Dalit assertion and social protest in pre-colonial times. Hitherto, the Dalit expression in pre-colonial times has been largely studied against the backdrop of the Bhakti movement. Also, as pointed out before, the resentment existing in the society due to caste discrimination contributed to the spread of Islam and later Sikhism. But the Lal Begi/Bala Shahi tradition is unique in the sense that Dalits, that too Chuhras who were 'lowest' even among Dalits, incredibly withdrew and distanced themselves from the religious frameworks adhered to by the oppressor and put forward an alternative and their 'own' distinct religious tradition. They refused to be judged according to Brahmanical or dominant caste norms and value systems. Rather, they 'reversed' these very notions to suit their agenda and to voice their resentment and express their desires.

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# नख-व्यवस्था: उत्तर-पश्चिम भारत में वंशावली-अभिलेखन एक राजनीतिक उपकरण के रूप में

शिवत्व बेनीवाल, इतिहास विभाग, दिल्ली विश्वविद्यालय, भारत

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*उत्तर-पश्चिमी भारत की भाट-बही परम्परा में संरक्षित नख-व्यवस्था ने युगपत् द्विविध कार्य सम्पन्न किया है; कुटुम्बों के वंशावली-अभिलेखों का संरक्षण तथा एक ऐसे तन्त्र का निर्माण जिसमें राजपूत जाति सनातन क्षत्रिय के रूप में एवं नैतिकतः न्यायसंगत अभिजात के रूप में प्रतिष्ठित हो। बही की व्यावहारिक उपयोगिता ही उसके राजनीतिक दावों को मान्यता प्रदान करती है। इस व्यवस्था के दो प्रमुख साधन हैं: 'संयोजक पूर्वज' यानि वह काल्पनिक राजपूत पूर्वज जो 'मुस्लिम-काल की अव्यवस्था' में 'राजपूत-धर्म' से च्युत होकर किसी राजपूतेतर जाति अथवा उपजाति अथवा गोत्र का प्रवर्तक बना, तथा 'असल गोत्र' की संकल्पना, जिसने तार्किक आक्षेप एवं व्यावहारिक स्वातन्त्र्य दोनों को असम्भव बनाया। बही की भूमिका द्विमुखी थी। एक ओर, कतिपय कुटुम्बों को पौराणिक देवताओं, वीरों एवं प्राचीन राजाओं के वैध वंशजों के रूप में स्थापित किया गया, दूसरी ओर, ब्राह्मणों एवं प्रतिष्ठित इस्लामी वंशावली के दावेदारों को छोड़कर, शेष समुदायों को उन्हीं पूर्वजों के 'पतित' वंशजों के रूप में अंकित किया गया। इस प्रकार उन्हें 'राजपूत ब्रह्माण्ड' से बाहर नहीं, अपितु उसके भीतर अधीनस्थ स्थान दिया गया। इस वृत्ताकार प्रमाण-शृंखला ने, जो भाट-बही से ख्यात-साहित्य तक, तत्पश्चात् औपनिवेशिक नृवंशविज्ञान तक एवं अन्ततः समुदायों की आत्म-धारणा तक विस्तृत थी, व्यवस्था के राजनीतिक निर्माण को स्वयंसिद्ध ऐतिहासिक तथ्य का रूप दिया। इस व्यवस्था की राजनीतिक उपलब्धि 'स्तरीय नम्यता' थी; शक्तिशाली के लिए 'पतित' पहचान परिवर्तनीय थी, शक्तिहीन के लिए स्थायी थी। वस्तुतः 'राजपूत' एक ऐसी श्रेणी थी जो सल्तनत-काल में उभरी, मुग़ल प्रशासन की मान्यता से हिन्दू अभिजात-वर्ग के रूप में सुदृढ़ हुई एवं कालान्तर में संस्थागत जाति बनी। इस अध्ययन की मौलिक स्थापना यह है कि पतित-राजपूतीकरण, राजपूतीकरण का संरचनागत छाया-पक्ष है; अर्थात्, 'राजपूत' एवं 'पतित राजपूत', दोनों एक ही संस्था के उत्पाद हैं।*

*The nakha-system, preserved within the bhāṭ-bahī tradition of north-western India, has simultaneously discharged a twofold function: the preservation of families' genealogical records and the construction of an institutional apparatus whereby the Rajput caste was enshrined as the eternal Kshatriya and as a morally legitimate aristocracy. The practical utility of the bahī itself ratifies its political claims. It operates through two primary instruments: the saṃyojaka pūrvaja (the 'conjunctural ancestor')—a putative Rajput ancestor who, having fallen from 'rājpūt-dharma' during the 'disorder of the Muslim period', becomes the progenitor of a non-Rajput caste, sub-caste, or gota—and the concept of the 'original gota', which rendered both logical objection and practical autonomy impossible. The role of the bahī was dual: certain families were, on the one hand, established as the legitimate descendants of mythical deities, heroes, and ancient kings; whilst all communities other than Brahmins and claimants to prestigious Islamic genealogies were, on the other, inscribed as 'fallen' descendants of those same ancestors—positioned not outside the 'Rajput universe' but within it, in a subordinate station. This circular chain of proof—extending from the bhāṭ-bahī to the khyāt literature, thence to colonial ethnography, and finally to communities' self-perception—transformed the politically fabricated character of the institution into a self-evident historical fact. The political achievement of this system was 'stratified flexibility': for the powerful, a 'fallen' identity was reversible; for the powerless, it was*

*permanent. 'Rajput', in effect, was a category that emerged during the Sultanate period, was consolidated as a Hindu aristocracy through Mughal administrative recognition, and over time became an institutionalised caste. The central thesis of this study is that fallen-Rajputisation constitutes the structural shadow-side of Rajputisation—that is, both 'Rajput' and 'fallen Rajput' are products of one and the same institution.*

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**मुख्य-शब्द**: भाट-बही, भाट-परम्परा, वंशावली-अभिलेखन, नख-व्यवस्था, राजपूतीकरण, पतित-राजपूत, पारस्परिक वैधता-निर्माण

## प्रस्तावना: बही का स्वभाव एवं शोध-प्रश्न

किसी भी सामाजिक संस्था को समझने के लिए केवल उसके रूप अथवा परम्परा का वर्णन पर्याप्त नहीं है, अपितु उसके सामाजिक-राजनीतिक कार्य का विश्लेषण भी अनिवार्य है। ब्रोनिस्वाफ़ मालिनोफ़्स्की का मनोवैज्ञानिक कार्यात्मकतावाद इस प्रकार की व्याख्या के लिए एक सुनिश्चित दृष्टिकोण प्रदान करता है; मिथक, परम्पराएँ एवं अनुष्ठान संस्थाओं को वैधता प्रदान करने वाली 'प्रयोजनात्मक अधिकार-पत्र' के रूप में कार्य करते हैं, अर्थात् समाज उन्हें अतीत, परम्परा एवं पवित्रता से जोड़कर स्थिर एवं स्वाभाविक प्रतीत कराता है।[1] उत्तर-पश्चिमी भारत की भाट-परम्परा में संरक्षित वंशावली-बहियाँ इसी प्रकार की एक संस्था हैं। प्रथमदृष्ट्या ये बहियाँ परिवारों की जन्म, मृत्यु एवं विवाह सम्बन्धी सूचनाओं का संकलन प्रतीत होती हैं। किन्तु वस्तुतः वे सामाजिक पदानुक्रम, जातिगत सम्बन्धों एवं ऐतिहासिक वैधता को संरक्षित एवं पुनरुत्पादित करने का कार्य करती हैं। इस व्यवस्था के माध्यम से न केवल परिवारों की स्मृति सुरक्षित रहती है, अपितु समुदायों की सामाजिक पहचान एवं उनके परस्पर सम्बन्धों की एक विशिष्ट व्याख्या भी पीढ़ी-दर-पीढ़ी अनुस्यूत रहती है। इसी कार्यात्मक दृष्टि के आलोक में यह शोधपत्र उत्तर-पश्चिमी भारत, विशेषतः राजस्थान, में प्रचलित वंशावली-लेखन की एक विशिष्ट विधा, नख-व्यवस्था, की विवेचना प्रस्तुत करता है।

राजस्थान के किसी गाँव में आज एक विशेष आयोजन है। परिवार के वंशानुगत भाट,[2] जिन्हें लोग सादर 'रावजी' कहते हैं, कुछ वर्षों के अन्तराल पर वंशावली-बही सहित पधारे हैं। घर के आँगन में तम्बू लगा है।

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[1] Bronisław Malinowski, *Myth in Primitive Psychology* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1926), 23.

[2] राजस्थान की भाट जाति कुल नौ पदानुक्रमित उपजातियों अथवा धरणों में संगठित है, जिनके मध्य 'रोटी-बेटी' का सम्बन्ध सामान्यतः निषिद्ध है। यजमान जातियों की पदानुक्रमिता के अनुरूप ही इनका आन्तरिक क्रम विन्यस्त होता है। वंशावली लेखन, संरक्षण एवं वाचन के लिए ये लोग एक विशेष लघुलिपि-नागरी का प्रशिक्षण लेते हैं, जिसे वे प्रायः 'बैताल नागरी' लिपि कहते हैं। लोग इन्हें राव, जग्गा, ब्रह्म-भाट अथवा बही-भाट के नामों से जानते हैं। अन्य जातियों की भाँति भाट भी अपनी उत्पत्ति राजपूतों से बताते हैं एवं इनके गोत्रों के नाम भी प्रायः राजपूत कुलों — भाटी, राठौड़, पवार — के आधार पर होते हैं। यद्यपि कुछ भाट उपजातियाँ अथवा उनके गोत्र अपनी उत्पत्ति ब्राह्मण, अग्रवाल इत्यादि जातियों से भी बताते हैं।

कुटुम्ब के समस्त सदस्य, वे सब भाई-बन्धु जिनके मूल पूर्वज एक हैं, एकत्र हैं, साथ ही पड़ोसी एवं सगे-सम्बन्धी भी उपस्थित हैं। वृद्ध पुरुष पहले घेरे में, युवा उनके पीछे, रावजी चारपाई पर विराजमान हैं। शेष सब नीचे दरी पर बैठे हैं। उन्होंने लाल वस्त्र में बँधी मोटी पोथी खोली है; यही 'बही' है। उसके काग़ज़ मोटे, खुरदरे एवं पीले-श्वेत हैं; निरन्तर हाथ लगने से वे मलिन हैं। यह बही अपनी भौतिक उपस्थिति में ही काल की वह सघनता समेटे हुए है जो किसी भी जीवित अभिलेख में होती है। यह केवल काग़ज़ नहीं, अपितु किसी परिवार की जैविक-सामाजिक स्मृति का मूर्त रूप है।[3]

रावजी बही खोलते ही गणेश-वन्दना करते हैं। इस क्रिया में ही बही का स्वभाव प्रकट होता है; यह एक धार्मिक अनुष्ठान है, न कि प्रशासनिक पाठ। तत्पश्चात् वे ब्रह्माण्डशास्त्रीय वृत्तान्त सुनाते हैं जो प्रत्येक बही में अंकित है; सृष्टि-रचना एवं चार वर्णों से आरम्भ होकर, परशुराम-कथा एवं सूर्यवंश-चन्द्रवंश से होकर, राम-कृष्ण एवं अर्द्ध-ऐतिहासिक राजा तक। यह अनुक्रम मनुस्मृति के प्रथम अध्याय की ब्रह्माण्डशास्त्रीय भूमिका से गहरा साम्य रखता है। भाट ब्राह्मणवाद की 'लघु-परम्परा' के वाहक हैं; वही विश्वदृष्टि, किन्तु न्यून औपचारिक शिक्षा सहित।[4] समस्त उपस्थितजन मन्त्रमुग्ध हैं; यह उनके अपने वंश का आख्यान है। तब वह क्षण आता है जब बही का राजनीतिक कार्य उद्घाटित होता है। रावजी बताते हैं कि 'मुस्लिम-काल की अव्यवस्था' में उस राजपूत राजा के किसी वंशज ने 'राजपूत-धर्म' से च्युत होकर एक पृथक् वंश-शाखा का प्रवर्तन किया। किन्तु जो राजपूत अविचल रहे जिन्होंने राजपूत-धर्म का पालन किया और स्वजाति में विवाह किये; वे 'असली राजपूत' हैं। राम एवं कृष्ण के वंशजों के रूप में सामाजिक श्रेष्ठता पर उनका दावा न्यायसंगत है। पितरों की स्मृति में, परिवार के सदस्य श्रद्धापूर्वक सुनते हैं एवं यही श्रद्धा इस समूची व्यवस्था की आधारशिला है।

इसी दिन रावजी बही में नवीन प्रविष्टियाँ करेंगे: जन्म, मृत्यु, विवाह, किसी का पंचायत-पद-ग्रहण। किन्तु बही में एक अन्य प्रविष्टि भी होगी जो इस संस्था के यथार्थ स्वभाव को उद्घाटित करती है; अभिलिखित राशि प्रदत्त से प्रायः अधिक होती है। अगले आगमन पर उस अतिरञ्जित राशि का स्मरण कराया जाएगा। न उसका खण्डन सम्भव है, न सत्यापन, क्योंकि बही स्वयं उसका एकमात्र प्रमाण है। वह भाट की पैतृक सम्पत्ति है। तदनुरूप, वंशावली-पाठ का सार्वजनिक चरित्र — परिवार के सदस्यों, ग्राम-प्रमुखों एवं पड़ोसियों की उपस्थिति में वाचन — उस वृत्तान्त को सामाजिक प्रामाणिकता प्रदान करता है। प्रत्येक ऐसे अवसर पर वंशावली की विषय-वस्तु पुनरावृत्त नहीं होती, अपितु सामाजिक यथार्थ के रूप में निर्मित होती है। यह शोधपत्र इसी संस्था के राजनीतिक कार्य का विश्लेषण करता है। इसका केन्द्रीय तर्क यह है कि नख-व्यवस्था ने राजपूत एवं राजपूतेतर समुदायों के मध्य पारस्परिक वैधता-निर्माण की चक्रीय संरचना स्थापित की।

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[3] मारवाड़ के कुछ गाँवों में यह परम्परा प्रचलित है कि परिवार के किसी वृद्धजन की मृत्यु के पश्चात् 'पगड़ी की रस्म' अथवा 'बारहवाँ' के अगले दिन बही-वाचन का आयोजन किया जाता है, जिससे नव-दिवंगत व्यक्ति तथा स्वर्गीय पूर्वजों को श्रद्धांजलि अर्पित की जा सके। इस अवसर पर खीर एवं मालपुए का भोजन भी रखा जाता है।

[4] Robert Redfield, *Peasant Society and Culture: An Anthropological Approach to Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), 67–104.

शोधपत्र, प्रस्तावना एवं उपसंहार सहित, सात खण्डों में विन्यस्त है: वंशावली-साहित्य की पाँच विधाओं का वर्गीकरण, वंशावली-लेखन का ऐतिहासिक उद्गम एवं त्रि-सोपानीय विस्तार, नख-व्यवस्था की वंशावली-संरचना एवं संयोजक-पूर्वज यान्त्रिकी, सात प्रकरण-अध्ययनों के माध्यम से व्यवस्था का सामाजिक एवं भौगोलिक विस्तार, व्यवस्था के पाँच परस्पर-सम्बद्ध सामाजिक-राजनीतिक प्रभाव, एवं उपसंहार।

## वंशावली-साहित्य की विभिन्न विधाएँ

नख-व्यवस्था का विश्लेषण करने से पूर्व उन साहित्यिक विधाओं की प्रकृति को समझना अनिवार्य है जिनके माध्यम से यह व्यवस्था अभिलेखित एवं प्रसारित हुई। मारवाड़ी गद्य-साहित्य में पाँच प्रमुख विधाएँ थीं: बात, पिढ़यावली, वंशावली, ख्यात एवं विगत। ये विधाएँ परस्पर घनिष्ठतः सम्बन्धित, किन्तु कार्यात्मक दृष्टि से भिन्न थीं। नॉर्मन पी. ज़िगलर के अनुसार पन्द्रहवीं शताब्दी से पूर्व इस साहित्य के संरक्षक संस्कृत-भाषी ब्राह्मण थे, जिन्हें 'भट्ट' कहा जाता था। किन्तु डिंगल भाषा में बातों का लेखन पन्द्रहवीं शताब्दी से आरम्भ हुआ, जब चारण-जाति को भी काव्य-रचना का अधिकार प्राप्त हुआ।[5] इन पाँचों विधाओं की आन्तरिक संरचना एवं परस्पर सम्बन्ध ही वह संस्थागत तन्त्र निर्मित करते हैं जिसके भीतर नख-व्यवस्था का विस्तार सम्भव हुआ।

'बात' संस्कृत 'वार्ता' से व्युत्पन्न एक विशेष डिंगल गद्य-आख्यान है, एक ऐसा प्रेरणाप्रद जीवनी-वृत्तान्त जो किसी महत्त्वपूर्ण व्यक्ति के सामाजिक दृष्टि से उल्लेखनीय प्रसंगों को केन्द्रीभूत करता है।[6] ये बातें वह प्रमुख माध्यम थीं जिनके द्वारा युवा राजपूतों को कुल-इतिहास में दीक्षित, पूर्वजों के नैतिक मूल्यों में अनुस्यूत एवं भावी भूमिकाओं के निर्वहन हेतु अभिमुख किया जाता था। परवर्ती बातों में तिथि-सहित दैनन्दिनी-स्वरूप भी मिलता है; जो लिखित अभिलेखों के मुग़ल प्रभाव को स्पष्टतः दर्शाता है।[7]

पिढ़यावली (पीढ़ियों की शृंखला) भाट जाति की राजनीतिक दृष्टि से सर्वाधिक प्रभावशाली विधा थी। भाट प्रत्येक संरक्षक-परिवार की पिढ़यावली बृहत् बहियों में रखते थे। इस समूची व्यवस्था की शक्ति-संरचना को समझने के लिए एक तथ्य निर्णायक है: ये बहियाँ भाट की निजी पैतृक सम्पत्ति मानी जाती थीं, न कि संरक्षक-परिवार की। नई प्रविष्टियाँ सदैव परिवार के वृद्धजनों एवं ग्राम-प्रमुखों की सार्वजनिक उपस्थिति में की जाती थीं। ज़िगलर के अनुसार पिढ़यावली के पास वह 'शब्द-समुच्चय' था जो वंश-परम्परा एवं आनुवंशिकता का

[5] Norman P. Ziegler, "Marvari Historical Chronicles: Sources for the Social and Cultural History of Rajasthan," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 13, no. 2 (1976): 233.

[6] 'बात' का पाठ परम्परागत रूप से मारू चारणों का क्षेत्र था। अफ़ीम-समारोहों में, होली-दीवाली पर एवं राजाओं के दरबार में इनका वाचन होता था; इन समारोहों में चारण की उपस्थिति अनिवार्य मानी जाती थी — उसके बिना उत्सव का आरम्भ ही सम्भव नहीं था।

[7] Ziegler, "Marvari Historical Chronicles," 221–22.

अनुरेखण करता था एवं जातियों तथा मनुष्यों में उचित व्यवस्था को वैधता प्रदान करता था। इसीलिए, भाटों को 'भाट राजा' की उपाधि प्राप्त थी।[8] दाय, दत्तक-ग्रहण एवं भूमि-अधिकार के विवादों में इन्हीं का प्रमाण निर्णायक माना जाता था। किन्तु इस व्यवस्था में एक गम्भीर संस्थागत दुर्बलता अन्तर्निहित थी। उत्तराधिकार में पुत्रों के मध्य बहियों का विभाजन होता था, जिस अवसर पर प्रतिलिपियाँ बनानी पड़ती थीं। यह प्रक्रिया त्रुटियों, पीढ़ियों के संकुचन एवं सचेत मिथ्याकरण का मार्ग प्रशस्त करती थी।[9]

वंशावली पिढ़यावली से दो दृष्टियों से भिन्न थी। प्रथम, यह परिवार की निजी सम्पत्ति थी, भाट की नहीं। द्वितीय, यह मुख्यतः प्रमुख शासक-परिवारों एवं महत्त्वपूर्ण भूस्वामियों में पाई जाती थी।[10] इसमें कुल-स्थापना के पूर्वजों से वर्तमान पीढ़ी पर्यन्त, भूमि-अनुदान, युद्ध एवं सेवा-विवरण आदि समस्त विवरण समाहित होते थे। रिचर्ड डी. सरन के अनुसार वंशावली-रचना को 'पवित्र तीर्थ-यात्रा अथवा पितरों को जलाञ्जलि-प्रदान के समतुल्य पुण्य-कर्म' माना जाता था।[11] यह वर्तमान युग के राजपूतों को उनके क्षत्रिय पूर्वजों एवं दैवी उद्गम से विधिवत् जोड़कर वंश को 'पवित्र' करती थी। यह पवित्रीकरण-तर्क ही वंशावली को एक साधारण अभिलेख से अतिक्रमित करके पवित्र आख्यान का स्वभाव प्रदान करता था। ऐसे आख्यानों पर साधारण ऐतिहासिक आपत्ति नहीं उठाई जाती थी। यह तथ्य इस समूची व्यवस्था के राजनीतिक तर्क को समझने की कुंजी है।

'ख्यात' किसी विशेष राजपूत कुल एवं उसकी शाखाओं के इतिहास से सम्बन्धित विधा है। प्राचीनतम उपलब्ध ख्यात मुहणोत नैणसी की है। नैणसी जोधपुर के जसवन्तसिंह प्रथम के अधीन कार्यरत एक ओसवाल जैन मुत्सद्दी थे, जो स्वयं उन्हीं तन्त्रों के माध्यम से राठौड़ वंशावली-क्रम में समाहित हो चुके थे जिनका वे अभिलेखन कर रहे थे।[12] उन्होंने यह ख्यात मूलतः बातों एवं पिढ़यावलियों का कुल-वार संकलन करके निर्मित की। इससे सिद्ध होता है कि सत्रहवीं शताब्दी के मध्य तक भाट-बहियाँ इतनी प्रतिष्ठित थीं कि दीवान-स्तर के अधिकारी उन्हें प्राथमिक ऐतिहासिक साक्ष्य मानते थे। ज़िगलर के अनुसार यह साहित्य बाहरी प्रदर्शन से अधिक 'आन्तरिक उपभोग' के लिए था। यह मुस्लिम विजय एवं प्रभुत्व के समक्ष जाति-क्रम, भूमि-अधिकार

[8] अगरचन्द नाहटा, "राजस्थानी ऐतिहासिक बातों व ख्यातों की परम्परा," *परम्परा*, भाग 11 (1961): 114–15.

[9] Ziegler, "Marvari Historical Chronicles," 236.

[10] Ibid., 228.

[11] Richard D. Saran, "Conquest and Colonization: Rajputs and Vasis in Middle-Period Marvar" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1978), 33, 39–40.

[12] पुरानी मारवाड़ी में 'सी' का अर्थ 'सिंह' होता है, इस प्रकार उनका नाम मेहता नैनसिंह मुहनोत था। इस काल तक नामों के साथ यदाकदा ही 'सी' प्रत्यय आता है — किन्तु अनेक जातियों के पुरुषों में। इस ख्यात का संकलन 1648 ई. के लगभग आरम्भ हुआ एवं नैणसी के दीवान-काल (1658–1666) में पूर्ण हुआ। यह राजस्थान में अपनी विधा की प्राचीनतम उपलब्ध एवं सटीक तिथि-निर्धारणीय रचना है।

एवं राजपूत मूल्यों की पुनर्व्याख्या की आवश्यकता से जन्मी एक अनुकूलन-प्रतिक्रिया थी।[13] 'विगत' ख्यात की तुलना में अधिक प्रशासनिक स्वभाव की विधा थी। नैणसी की *मारवाड़ रा परगनाँ री विगत* इस विधा की प्रतिनिधि रचना है।

इन पाँचों विधाओं में एक सुस्पष्ट विकास-क्रम दृष्टिगोचर होता है: बात एवं पिढ़यावली मूल विधाएँ हैं; ख्यात एवं विगत उनके विस्तृत लिखित संकलन हैं। इस विकास-क्रम के अनुरूप वंश-वर्गीकरण की शब्दावली में भी एक निर्णायक परिवर्तन हुआ। मध्यकाल में 'साख' प्रचलित था। सत्रहवीं-अठारहवीं शताब्दी के सन्धिकाल में 'खाँप' ने उसका स्थान ग्रहण किया। एवं आधुनिक काल में 'नख', जिसका शाब्दिक अर्थ 'उँगली का नाखून' एवं प्रयोगात्मक अर्थ 'एक खण्ड, एक भाग' है, सर्वप्रचलित हुआ।[14] यह शब्दावली-परिवर्तन केवल भाषा-विकास नहीं, अपितु वर्गीकरण-प्रणाली के उत्तरोत्तर औपचारिकीकरण का प्रमाण है। और, यही औपचारिकीकरण वह संस्थागत तन्त्र है जिसके भीतर नख-व्यवस्था ने राजस्थान के समस्त समाज को अपनी परिधि में आबद्ध किया।

## वंशावली-लेखन का ऐतिहासिक उद्गम

भाट जाति यह दावा करती है कि वह सृष्टि-रचना के समय से ही वंशावलियाँ लिखती आई है; रावजी गणेश-वन्दना के ठीक पश्चात् यही घोषित करते हैं। किन्तु ऐतिहासिक साक्ष्य इस दावे को किसी भी अर्थ में प्रमाणित नहीं करते। ज़िगलर के अनुसार राजस्थान में लिखित वंशावली-परम्परा लगभग पन्द्रहवीं शताब्दी से तीन अभिसारी दबावों के अधीन विकसित हुई। मुस्लिम विजय एवं प्रभुत्व ने विखाऊ को, उस संकट-काल को जिसमें जाति-क्रम, भूमि-अधिकार एवं वंश-पद सभी विवादास्पद हुए, जन्म दिया एवं लिखित प्रमाण की संस्थागत अपेक्षा उत्पन्न की। मुग़ल प्रशासनिक संस्कृति ने वंश एवं कुल के सुस्पष्ट अभिलेखन पर बल दिया। 'राजपूत' पद का जाति-अर्थ में उद्भव, जिसे पौराणिक क्षत्रिय-वंश से पुष्ट करना था, ने इस लेखन को वैचारिक अनिवार्यता प्रदान की।[15] वस्तुतः यह दावा स्वयं उसी तन्त्र का भाग है जिसका यह शोधपत्र विश्लेषण करता है। जो अभिलेख मुग़ल-काल में निर्मित हुआ, वह यदि अपनी उत्पत्ति उसी काल में बताए तो राजपूत जाति

[13] लुइगी पी. टेस्सितोरी एवं डेविड पी. हेनिगे का मत था कि ख्यात-साहित्य का प्रेरणा-स्रोत मुग़ल दरबार के साथ राजनीतिक प्रतिस्पर्धा था — अकबर की उपस्थिति में प्रत्येक राजपूत राजकुमार अपने वंश-दावे को सुदृढ़ वंशावली से पुष्ट करना चाहता था। ज़िगलर इस व्याख्या को अपर्याप्त मानते हैं। नैणसी की *मारवाड़ री परगनाँ री विगत*— जसवन्तसिंह प्रथम को शाहजहाँ द्वारा प्रदत्त सात परगनों का विस्तृत सर्वेक्षण — को जॉन स्मिथ ने 'एक प्रकार का Domesday Book' कहा है; देखें: John D. Smith, "An Introduction to the Language of the Historical Documents from Rajasthan," *Modern Asian Studies* 9, no. 4 (1975): 437, n. 18.

[14] Richard D. Saran and Norman P. Ziegler, *The Meṛtīyo Rāṭhoṛs of Meṛto, Rājasthān: Select Translations Bearing on the History of a Rajput Family, 1462–1660,* vol. 1 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001): 63–65.

[15] Ziegler, "Marvari Historical Chronicles," 219–21, 235, 243.

की 'धर्मरक्षक' की भूमिका सन्दिग्ध होती। 'सृष्टि-काल से लेखन' का दावा उस सन्देह को पहले ही असम्भव कर देता है।

ज़िगलर स्पष्ट करते हैं कि समस्त राजस्थानी साहित्य का आधार मौखिक परम्परा है। बारहवीं-तेरहवीं शताब्दी से पूर्व देशी भाषाओं में लिखित वंशावली का कोई प्रामाणिक साक्ष्य नहीं मिलता। जो लिखित सामग्री इस काल से उपलब्ध है, वह संस्कृत में है एवं जैन मन्दिरों तथा मठों में सुरक्षित है।[16] चारण, भाट, ढोली, मीरासी एवं अन्य 'चारण-परम्परा' के समुदाय राजवंशों की वीर-कथाएँ एवं वंश-क्रम मौखिक रूप से संरक्षित करते थे, किन्तु इस परम्परा में सहस्रों परिवारों की पीढ़ी-दर-पीढ़ी अद्यतन वंशावली रखना न तो सम्भव था, न आवश्यक। मौखिक परम्परा का मूल कार्य स्मरण था, अभिलेखन नहीं। क्रिस्टोव वॉन फ़्यूरर-हाइमेण्डोर्फ़ इन साहित्य-विधाओं का उत्कर्ष-काल 1400–1800 ई. मानते हैं। यही वह अवधि है जब राजस्थान में काग़ज़ की उपलब्धता व्यापक रूप से स्थापित थी, तथा देशीय सामन्त वर्ग का तुर्क शासकों के माध्यम से इस्लामी-फ़ारसी लेखन-परम्परा से परिचय भी व्यापक रूप से स्थापित था।[17]

लिखित बही की संस्थागत व्यापकता के लिए दो भौतिक-प्राविधिक पूर्वशर्तें एक साथ अनिवार्य थीं; काग़ज़ की सर्वसुलभता एवं मुड़िया लिपि का प्रचलन।[18] भारत में काग़ज़ की व्यापक उपलब्धता दिल्ली सल्तनत के काल से आरम्भ हुई। मुग़ल काल तक वह प्रशासनिक अभिलेखों का नियमित माध्यम बना।[19] बही में विविध सामाजिक-आर्थिक सूचनाओं का नियमित एवं त्वरित अभिलेखन अपेक्षित था। अतः ऐसी लिपि की आवश्यकता स्वाभाविक थी जो शीघ्र लेखन के अनुकूल हो। नागरी लिपि की जटिल मात्राएँ एवं बहु-स्ट्रोक संरचना इस प्रयोजन के लिए अनुपयुक्त थीं। इसी समय उत्तर भारत में एक सरलीकृत एवं व्यवहारोपयोगी

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[16] Ibid., 220, 233; cf. L. P. Tessitori, "A Progress Report on the Work done during the Year 1917 in Connection with the Bardic and Historical Survey of Rajasthan," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, N.S. 15 (1919), 20–21.

[17] Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, "The Historical Value of Indian Bardic Literature," in *Historians of India, Pakistan and Ceylon*, ed. C. H. Philips (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 87–88.

[18] भारत की परम्परागत लेखन-सामग्री, भोजपत्र एवं ताड़पत्र, दोनों बहुमूल्य, श्रम-साध्य एवं अल्पायु थे। सहस्रों परिवारों की वंशावलियाँ — जिन्हें प्रत्येक कुछ वर्षों में अद्यतन करना हो, जिन्हें यात्रा में मौसम का प्रहार सहना हो, जो पीढ़ी-दर-पीढ़ी हस्तान्तरित होनी हों, ऐसी बहियाँ ताड़पत्र पर व्यावहारिक रूप से असम्भव थीं।

[19] इरफ़ान हबीब के अनुसार काग़ज़ का भारतीय उपमहाद्वीप में प्रवेश ग्यारहवीं शताब्दी से पूर्व ही हो चुका था, सम्भवतः अरब-शासित सिन्ध तथा ग़ज़नवी आधिपत्य-क्षेत्रों के माध्यम से। यद्यपि ग्यारहवीं–बारहवीं शताब्दियों में कश्मीर एवं पश्चिमी भारत में इसके प्रारम्भिक उपयोग के प्रमाण प्राप्त होते हैं, तथापि तेरहवीं शताब्दी में दिल्ली सल्तनत की स्थापना के साथ ही काग़ज़-निर्माण को संस्थागत स्वरूप प्राप्त हुआ। चौदहवीं शताब्दी तक दिल्ली में यह पर्याप्त मात्रा में उपलब्ध हो चुका था, यद्यपि इसके उपरान्त भी अनेक शताब्दियों तक इसका प्रसार सम्पूर्ण उपमहाद्वीप में क्षेत्रीय दृष्टि से असमान बना रहा; देखें: Irfan Habib, *Economic History of Medieval India, 1200–1500* (New Delhi: Pearson Education India, 2011), 95–96.

लिपि-रूप विकसित हुआ, जिसे सामान्यतः 'मुड़िया' अथवा 'महाजनी' कहा जाता है। यद्यपि मुड़िया लिपि का उद्भव एक दीर्घवर्ती विकास-प्रक्रिया का परिणाम है, जिसका आधार दसवीं शताब्दी में विकसित लण्डा-परम्परा में निहित है, तथापि एक विशिष्ट वाणिज्यिक लिपि के रूप में इसका स्पष्ट अभ्युदय लगभग बारहवीं शताब्दी से माना जा सकता है। सत्रहवीं–अठारहवीं शताब्दियों तक यह उत्तर भारत के व्यापारी समुदायों में व्यापक रूप से प्रचलित थी। इसी प्रचलित लिपि को भाटों ने बही-लेखन के लिए अपनाया, जिसे वे 'बैताल नागरी' के नाम से अभिहित करते हैं।[20] काग़ज़ ने माध्यम दिया, और मुड़िया ने सरलता प्रदान की।

भौतिक सम्भावना एवं वास्तविक प्रचलन के मध्य की रिक्तता मुग़ल-काल की प्रशासनिक संस्कृति ने इस रिक्तता को पूर्ण किया। मुग़ल दरबार में वंश एवं कुल की प्रतिष्ठा का निर्णायक महत्त्व था। ज़िगलर के अनुसार मुग़ल नीतियों ने राजपूत आत्म-धारणा को गहराई से प्रभावित किया और राजपूतों को अपनी आन्तरिक विभाजन-प्रणाली को अधिक सुस्पष्ट एवं अभिलेख-योग्य बनाने पर विवश किया।[21] ज़िगलर कहते हैं कि अधिकांश राजस्थानी विद्वानों के अनुसार ख्यात, विगत एवं बही का पूर्ण लिखित रूप मुग़ल दरबार एवं फ़ारसी इतिहास-ग्रन्थों के प्रभाव में परिपक्व हुआ, हालाँकि वह स्वयं इस व्याख्या को अपर्याप्त मानते हैं।[22]

इस पृष्ठभूमि में इस शोधपत्र का केन्द्रीय प्रश्न उभरता है: वंशावली-लेखन राजवंशों तक सीमित क्यों नहीं रहा एवं वह किस तन्त्र के माध्यम से जाट, राईका, गुज्जर, माली, ढोली एवं कसाई तक पहुँचा? यह विस्तार स्वतःस्फूर्त नहीं था; इसका प्रमाण उसकी एकरूपता है। चाहे कुम्हार की बही हो, चमार की, माली की अथवा मुस्लिम कसाई की — प्रत्येक में एक ही अनुक्रम है: सृष्टि-मिथक, चार वर्ण, राजपूत वंश, अर्द्ध-ऐतिहासिक राजा, मुस्लिम-काल की अव्यवस्था, पतन का क्षण, वर्तमान जाति का गोत्र। यह अनुक्रम इतना एकरूप है कि इसे परम्परा का स्वाभाविक विकास कहना असम्भव है, और ऐसा प्रारूप प्रशिक्षण के बिना नहीं फैलता।

यह विस्तार तीन सोपानों में घटित हुआ। प्रथम सोपान राजवंशीय संहिताकरण का था। पन्द्रहवीं-सोलहवीं शताब्दी के प्रमुख हिन्दू राजवंशों ने अपनी मौखिक वंशावलियों को लिखित एवं व्यवस्थित रूप दिया। ज़िगलर

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[20] K. S. Singh, ed., *People of India: Rajasthan*, vol. 38, pt. 1 (Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 1998), 434.

[21] आईन-ए-अकबरी में अबुल-फ़ज़्ल ने उल्लेख किया है कि सम्राट के आदेश से सैनिकों के वर्णनात्मक पंजीकरण-रोल तैयार किये गये जिनमें आयु, पिता का नाम, निवास-स्थान एवं जाति अंकित होती थी। ज़िगलर रेखांकित करते हैं कि मुल्ला सुर्ख़ जैसे हुमायूँ के दरबार के ग्रन्थपाल जोधपुर में सेवा करते थे — जो उस सांस्कृतिक अन्तर्विनिमय का प्रत्यक्ष प्रमाण है।

[22] Ziegler, "Marvari Historical Chronicles," 233–34, fn. 68 (Lalas, 'Madhyakalin Rajasthani Gadhya Sahitya,' *Parampara*, Parts 15–16, 1963, 248). ज़िगलर कहते हैं कि यह उस सामाजिक-राजनीतिक परिवेश की उपेक्षा करती है जिसने इस साहित्य को जन्म दिया — यह साहित्य मुग़ल-अनुकरण नहीं, अपितु मुस्लिम विजय एवं प्रभुत्व के समक्ष जाति-क्रम, भूमि-अधिकार एवं राजपूत मूल्यों की पुनर्व्याख्या की आन्तरिक आवश्यकता से उत्पन्न अनुकूलन-प्रतिक्रिया था।

के अनुसार 'राजपूत' पद का जाति के अर्थ में प्रयोग पन्द्रहवीं शताब्दी से पहले नहीं मिलता;[23] इससे पूर्व इस क्षेत्र के राजवंश स्वयं को 'ब्रह्म-क्षत्रिय' कहते थे। जिन वंशों ने यह पहचान धारण की, वे 'ऋषिवंशी राजपूत' कहलाए। इस नई सामूहिक पहचान को पौराणिक वैधता देने के लिए राजवंशों ने अपनी वंशावलियों को सूर्यवंश एवं चन्द्रवंश से जोड़ा। इस प्रकार प्रमुख राजाओं की वंशावलियाँ ब्रह्मा की सृष्टि से आरम्भ होकर राम अथवा कृष्ण से होकर अपने अर्द्ध-ऐतिहासिक मूलपुरुष तक पहुँचती थीं। द्वितीय सोपान सामन्तीय विस्तार का था; जिसके तहत उन राजाओं के अधीन सामन्तों एवं जागीरदारों ने स्वयं को मुख्य राजवंशों की शाखाओं के रूप में स्थापित किया। मुख्य राजवंश की वंशावली में किसी बिन्दु पर 'शाखा-भेद' दिखाया गया एवं वहाँ से सामन्त की स्वतन्त्र वंश-शृंखला आरम्भ हुई। सामन्त को ब्रह्मा से पुनः अपनी बही नहीं लिखवानी पड़ती थी; वह मुख्य वंशावली को स्वीकार करता था एवं केवल उस बिन्दु से आगे की अपनी शाखा संलग्न करता था। तृतीय सोपान जन-सामान्य तक विस्तार का था। भाटों ने इन्हीं वंशावलियों को आधार बनाकर राजपूत-अभिजात्य से परे के समुदायों तक प्रस्थान किया। पर यहाँ एक मूलभूत समस्या थी। सामान्य परिवारों को अपने केवल कुछ ही पूर्वजों के नाम ज्ञात थे, जबकि किसी स्थापित राजपूत वंश तक पहुँचने के लिए एक विशाल ऐतिहासिक रिक्तता को अतिक्रमित करना था। इस रिक्तता को भरने के लिए भाट ने एक 'संयोजक पूर्वज' का निर्माण किया; एक मध्यवर्ती कड़ी जो दोनों के बीच सेतु का कार्य करती थी।

इस त्रि-सोपानीय प्रक्रिया का सर्वाधिक प्रत्यक्ष ऐतिहासिक प्रमाण नैणसी के ग्रन्थों में मिलता है। नैणसी ने अपनी ख्यात संकलित करते समय भाट-बहियों को प्राथमिक स्रोत के रूप में प्रयुक्त किया। सत्रहवीं शताब्दी के मध्य तक भाट-बहियाँ इतनी प्रतिष्ठित थीं कि दीवान-स्तर का अधिकारी उन्हें आधिकारिक ऐतिहासिक स्रोत मानकर उद्धृत करता। किन्तु नैणसी केवल एक संकलक नहीं, अपितु स्वयं एक साक्ष्य भी थे। पिछले

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[23] Ibid., 242–43. ज़िगलर के अनुसार कतिपय विद्वानों ने रेखांकित किया है कि राजपूत पद जाति-अर्थ में मुग़ल काल के ठीक पूर्व एवं उसके दौरान ही व्यापक रूप से प्रचलित हुआ। डी.सी. सरकार के अनुसार, मुस्लिम आक्रमणों से पूर्व 'राजपुत्र' का अभिप्राय 'अश्वारोही सैनिक', 'ग्राम-प्रमुख' अथवा 'अधीनस्थ प्रमुख' था, न कि कोई वंशानुगत जाति-वर्ग। अबुल-फ़ज़्ल ने आईन-ए-अकबरी की प्रान्तीय सांख्यिकीय तालिकाओं में 'राजपूत' को एक औपचारिक जाति-वर्ग के रूप में व्यापक स्तर पर अभिलेखित करके इस क्रमिक समेकन-प्रक्रिया को संस्थागत स्थायित्व प्रदान किया — यह इस उभरती श्रेणी का मुग़ल प्रशासनिक शब्दावली में सर्वाधिक व्यवस्थित संहिताकरण था। वंशावली-लेखन ने ठीक इसी संहिताकरण द्वारा निर्मित सीमाओं एवं सदस्यता-मानदण्डों को अपने संचालन का आधार बनाया। इस पृष्ठभूमि में प्रो. इरफ़ान हबीब का विश्लेषण विशेष महत्त्व रखता है: उनके अनुसार 'राजपूत' शब्द का एक सुसंगत जाति के नाम के रूप में प्रयोग एवं उसके घटकों की एकता का बोध — दोनों सोलहवीं शताब्दी के फ़ारसी स्रोतों में सहसा प्रकट होते हैं; अतः यह पहचान पूर्ववर्ती काल में ही मौन रूप से विकसित हुई होगी। उनके विश्लेषण के अनुसार इस ग्रामीण अभिजात-वर्ग की जाति-एकता सम्भवतः एक वास्तविक वर्ग-एकता से उत्पन्न हुई, जब उच्चतर तत्त्व ग्रामीण अभिजात्य की निम्नतर श्रेणियों में समाहित हुए — इसी विकास-क्रम की पुष्टि 'ज़मींदार' शब्द के इतिहास से भी होती है, जो चौदहवीं शताब्दी के उत्तरार्द्ध में केवल प्रमुख प्रधानों के लिए प्रयुक्त होता था एवं डेढ़ शताब्दी के भीतर उस व्यापक वर्ग का मानक अभिधान बना जिसका पूर्व में कोई नाम इसलिए नहीं था क्योंकि उसका कोई समेकित अस्तित्व ही नहीं था। देखें: Irfan Habib, "The Social Distribution of Landed Property in Pre-British India," in *Essays in Indian History: Towards a Marxist Perception* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 1995), 90.

पृष्ठों में उल्लिखित तथ्य यहाँ निर्णायक है। वे ओसवाल जैन थे, राजपूत नहीं; तथापि उनकी ख्यात में उनका परिवार राठौड़ राजपूतों से उद्भूत प्रस्तुत है।[24] एवं वे जाटों के केवल दो गोत्रों, गोदारा एवं पूनिया, को 'असल' बताते हुए शेष समस्त जाट गोत्रों को राजपूत-मूल का घोषित करते हैं।[25] राजस्थान का सर्वाधिक प्रभावशाली प्रशासक-इतिहासकार उसी तन्त्र का अंग था जिसका वह स्वयं अभिलेखन कर रहा था। यही सिद्ध करता है कि सत्रहवीं शताब्दी के मध्य तक तृतीय सोपान पूर्णतः स्थापित था। तृतीय सोपान में प्रयुक्त इस 'संयोजक पूर्वज' की वृत्तान्त-संरचना एवं उसके सामाजिक-राजनीतिक कार्य का विस्तृत विश्लेषण आगे प्रस्तुत किया जाएगा।

## नख-व्यवस्था की संरचना एवं यान्त्रिकी

पिछले भाग में यह स्थापित किया गया कि वंशावली-लेखन की परम्परा तीन सोपानों के माध्यम से राजवंशों से जन-सामान्य तक पहुँची। किन्तु इस विस्तार की वास्तविक प्रविधि — भाट किसी सामान्य परिवार के ज्ञात अन्तिम पूर्वज को किसी स्थापित राजपूत वंश से किस प्रकार जोड़ते थे — तब भी अनुत्तरित थी।

राजपूत वंशावली-वर्गीकरण एक बहुस्तरीय संरचना पर आधारित था जिसे सात अवरोही सोपानों में व्यवस्थित किया जा सकता है: जाति, वंश, कुल, गोत्र, साख, खाँप एवं नख। इन सातों सोपानों की संरचना मारवाड़ के राजपूत नायक राव जयमल विरमदेवोत मेड़तिया की पहचान में दृष्टव्य है। जयमल राजपूत जाति के सदस्य थे। उनका वंश सूर्यवंश था, कुल राठौड़, गोत्र गौतम, साख कामधज, खाँप मेड़तिया, एवं विरमदेवोत उनका नख, अर्थात् वे विरमदेव के वंशज थे।[26] 'नख' शब्द का शाब्दिक अर्थ 'नाखून' है; किन्तु वंशावली-शब्दावली में इसका आशय किसी वंश की अत्यन्त सूक्ष्म अन्तिम शाखा से है। प्रथम दृष्टि में यह वर्गीकरण का अन्तिम स्तर प्रतीत होता है; किन्तु वास्तव में यही वह बिन्दु है जहाँ राजपूत वंशावली-वृक्ष अपनी सीमा का अतिक्रम करके व्यापक समाज से जुड़ता है। नख वह संरचनात्मक उपकरण है जिसके माध्यम से राजपूत वंशावली की आन्तरिक वर्गीकरण-प्रणाली राजपूतेतर जातियों एवं समुदायों पर भी आरोपित होती है।

परम्परागत रूप से राजपूतों में छत्तीस राजकुल माने जाते थे। यह अवधारणा न्यूनतम बारहवीं शताब्दी तक प्रचलित रही।[27] किन्तु 'छत्तीस' की यह संख्या आरम्भ से ही एक मानक प्रतीक थी, वास्तविक गणना नहीं।

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[24] Saran and Ziegler, *The Meṛtīyo Rāṭhoṛs of Meṛto*, 15.

[25] Ibid., 88. यहाँ यह बताना उचित होगा कि आज के समय भाट की बही के अनुसार गोदारा गोत्र के जाटों का नख गहलोत एवं पूनिया गोत्र के जाटों का नख चौहान है। उल्टे, मारवाड़ क्षेत्र के भाटों की परम्परा के अनुसार सिनसिनवार एक असल जाट गोत्र है, किन्तु ब्रज क्षेत्र में उनका नख जदौन बताया जाता है।

[26] Ibid., 58.

[27] कल्हण की राजतरंगिणी में राजपूत कुलों की संख्या छत्तीस अंकित की गई है; कुमारपाल-प्रबन्ध एवं पृथ्वीराज रासो में भी यही परम्परा है। किन्तु वर्णरत्नाकर में बहत्तर राजपूत कुलों का उल्लेख मिलता है; ए.एच. बिंगले ने अपने सर्वेक्षण में यह संख्या अठहत्तर अथवा इससे भी अधिक पाई।

इस आदर्श का सामाजिक विस्तार राजपूत जाति की सीमाओं से परे तक हुआ। उत्तर-पश्चिम भारत के समाज ने अपने समूचे सामाजिक विभाजन को 'छत्तीस बिरादरियों' के रूप में परिभाषित करना आरम्भ किया। मध्यकालीन फ़ारसी लेखन में भी इस अवधारणा का उल्लेख मिलता है; पंजाब, हरियाणा एवं राजस्थान की संस्कृतियों में आज भी 'छत्तीस बिरादरी' एक व्यापक प्रचलित पद है जिसका आशय 'समस्त समाज' से है, जबकि वास्तविक जातियाँ इस संख्या से कहीं अधिक हैं। इस प्रकार छत्तीस राजकुलों की अवधारणा उस समाज के सामाजिक-राजनीतिक स्व-बोध की मूलाधार बनी। नख-व्यवस्था इसी स्व-बोध का वंशावली-अभिलेखन थी।

जब भाट किसी राजपूतेतर परिवार की वंशावली निर्मित करता था, तो उसके समक्ष एक मूलभूत समस्या थी। उस परिवार को अपने केवल कुछ ही पूर्वजों के नाम ज्ञात होते थे, जबकि राजपूत वंशावली-वृक्ष शताब्दियों पूर्व पौराणिक वंशों तक जाता था। इन दोनों के मध्य एक विशाल ऐतिहासिक रिक्तता थी। इस रिक्तता को भरने के लिए भाट एक 'संयोजक पूर्वज' का निर्माण करता था, एक काल्पनिक राजपूत जो परिवार के ज्ञात पूर्वज एवं किसी स्थापित राजपूत वंश के बीच सेतु का कार्य करता था। यह संयोजक पूर्वज सदैव एक निश्चित वृत्तान्त-संरचना में प्रकट होता था। 'मुस्लिम-काल की अव्यवस्था' में उस राजपूत ने कोई ऐसा आचरण किया जो 'राजपूत-धर्म' के विरुद्ध माना गया — किसी 'निम्न' जाति की स्त्री से विवाह,[28] कोई निषिद्ध व्यवसाय, अथवा इस्लाम-स्वीकृति। फलतः वह राजपूत जाति से पृथक् होकर उस अन्य जाति का प्रवर्तक बना। उस काल्पनिक पूर्वज का नाम प्रायः परिवार के गोत्र-नाम से व्युत्पन्न होता था ताकि सम्बन्ध स्वाभाविक प्रतीत हो। उदहारण के तौर पर, सारण गोत्र का संयोजक पूर्वज 'सारणराव भाटी' होगा।[29] वह सदैव उसी 'मुस्लिम-काल की अव्यवस्था' में अवस्थित होता था, इतिहास के उस खण्ड में जहाँ सत्यापन व्यावहारिक रूप से असम्भव है। इस पतन-कथा का सामाजिक प्रभाव द्वि-स्तरीय था। एक ओर उस राजपूतेतर समुदाय को एक गौरवशाली राजपूत मूल प्राप्त होता था, वहीं दूसरी ओर उसकी वर्तमान सामाजिक स्थिति को एक नैतिक-

[28] उदाहरणस्वरूप समाजवादी पार्टी के वरिष्ठ नेता राजकुमार भाटी ने *दैनिक जागरण* (30 अक्टूबर, 2021) को दिए साक्षात्कार में ग्रेटर नोएडा के भाटी गोत्र के गुज्जरों की उत्पत्ति इसी प्रारूप में वर्णित की: "12वीं सदी में राजस्थान के जैसलमेर से राजपूत राजा राव कासल भाटी ने ग्रेटर नोएडा के कासना इलाके में अपना राज स्थापित किया था। उन्होंने रीलखा गाँव की एक गुजर युवती से शादी की। गुजर पत्नी से पैदा संतान गुजर भाटी हो गईं। जो संतानें राव कासल की राजपूत पत्नी से हुईं, वे रावल कहलाए।" यह एक आधुनिक राजनेता द्वारा की गई अनायास एवं अनैतिहासिक आत्म-व्याख्या है — किसी वैचारिक प्रयोजन से नहीं, अपितु इसलिए कि यही वृत्तान्त उनकी सामाजिक स्मृति का अंग बन चुका है। यही इस वृत्तान्त-प्रारूप की वास्तविक शक्ति का प्रमाण है: संयोजक पूर्वज की यह कथा — एक राजपूत पूर्वज, एक 'निम्न' जाति की स्त्री से सम्बन्ध, एवं उससे एक नई जाति-पहचान का जन्म — उत्तर-पश्चिम भारत की सैंकड़ों जातियों के सहस्रों गोत्रों में समान रूप से प्रचलित है; केवल पात्रों के नाम भिन्न हैं। यह एकरूपता आकस्मिक नहीं — यह भाट-बही की उस संस्थागत प्रशिक्षण-परम्परा का परिणाम है जिसने एक ही वृत्तान्त-साँचे को समस्त जातियों पर आरोपित किया।

[29] लखमीचन्द, *तवारीख जैसलमेर* (1891; पुनर्मुद्रण, जोधपुर: राजस्थानी ग्रन्थागार, 2019), 14–16; हरि सिंह भाटी, *पूगल का इतिहास* (बीकानेर: स्व-प्रकाशन, 1989), परिशिष्ट — 'भाटियों की खाँपें', 65–66.

ऐतिहासिक व्याख्या प्राप्त होती थी। वह राजपूत-धर्म से च्युति का परिणाम थी, कोई स्वाभाविक नियति नहीं। वंशावली गौरव एवं अपराध-बोध, दोनों उत्पन्न करती थी। यही उसकी राजनीतिक शक्ति का स्रोत था।

नख-व्यवस्था में गोत्र-वर्गीकरण का स्वरूप सभी जातियों में एक समान नहीं था। यह भिन्नता नख-व्यवस्था का एक विश्लेषणात्मक सूत्र है। एक प्रकार की जातियों में नख एवं गोत्र अभिन्न थे और उनके समस्त गोत्र राजपूत कुलों के नामों पर आधारित थे; मारवाड़ की फूलमाली एवं बावरी जाति इसके उदाहरण हैं।[30] इन जातियों में 'असल' एवं 'पतित' का विभेद नहीं था; समस्त समुदाय एक समान राजपूत-मूल से उद्भूत माना जाता था। दूसरे प्रकार की जातियों में दो, ढाई अथवा चार गोत्रों को 'असल' घोषित किया जाता था। 'चार' की यह संख्या ब्राह्मणीय परम्परा से आती है जिसमें सम्पूर्ण सृष्टि के गोत्र चार मूल ऋषि-गोत्रों से उद्भूत माने जाते हैं।[31] शेष गोत्रों को राजपूत-मूल से उद्भूत 'पतित' गोत्र बताया जाता था। किन्तु इस द्वितीय प्रकार में एक विशिष्ट तार्किक संरचना अन्तर्निहित थी जो इस समूची व्यवस्था को अखण्डनीय बनाती थी। जब उन 'असल' गोत्रों की अपनी बहियाँ खोली जाती थीं, तो वहाँ भी वही संरचना पुनरावृत्त होती थी। उन्हें भी किसी

[30] मारवाड़ की फूलमाली जाति के बारह गोत्र — कछवाहा, गहलोत, चौहान, टाँक, तंवर, दहिया, देवड़ा, पंवार, परिहार, भाटी, सांखला एवं सोलंकी — तथा बावरी जाति के सात गोत्र राजपूत कुलों एवं साखाओं के नामों पर आधारित हैं। इसी मध्य, फूलमाली समुदाय इस नख व्यवस्था को इतनी गहराई से आत्मसात् करता है कि उसने ब्रिटिश काल में अनेक राजपूत परम्पराएँ स्वयं को राजपूत-मूल के रूप में प्रमाणित करने के उद्देश्य से अपना लीं। समुदाय की मान्यता है कि वे प्रतिहार-काल में मण्डोर के राजाओं के योद्धा थे, किन्तु मुस्लिम-काल की अव्यवस्था के कारण उन्हें उद्यान-कर्म आरम्भ करना अनिवार्य हुआ — इसीलिए वे स्वयं को 'सैनिक क्षत्रिय माली' कहते हैं। इस दावे को संस्थागत मान्यता भी प्राप्त हुई: 6 फ़रवरी 1937 ई. के जोधपुर सरकार के आदेश-पत्र (सं. 2240) में मुख्यमन्त्री मेहकमास डी.एम. फ़ील्ड ने स्पष्ट किया कि महाराजा को पट्टों एवं विकास-विभाग के अभिलेखों में मालियों को 'सैनिक क्षत्रिय' के रूप में अंकित करने पर कोई आपत्ति नहीं है। यह प्रकरण 'स्तरीय नम्यता' का एक प्रत्यक्ष उदाहरण है: यही समुदाय अन्य माली उपजातियों को अपने से हीन मानता है — यद्यपि वह स्वयं ओबीसी आरक्षण का लाभ उठाता है — क्योंकि उसके पास भाट-बही-तन्त्र एवं राजकीय अभिलेख, दोनों का समर्थन है। यहाँ यह भी स्पष्ट किया जाता है कि कुछ जातियों में 'असल गोत्र' के स्थान पर 'असल उपजाति' की संकल्पना है, क्योंकि उनके भीतर अनेक उपजातियाँ पाई जाती हैं।

[31] यहाँ 'चार' की संख्या ब्राह्मणीय परम्परा से आती है जिसमें सम्पूर्ण सृष्टि के गोत्र चार मूल ऋषि-गोत्रों से उद्भूत माने जाते हैं — इस सन्दर्भ में यह स्पष्ट करना आवश्यक है कि शोधपत्र में प्रयुक्त 'गोत्र' शब्द वास्तव में उस 'गोत' का लिखित रूप है जो प्रत्येक जाति अथवा उपजाति के भीतर पाए जाने वाले कुल-समूहों के लिए आम बोलचाल में प्रचलित है; यह अनुष्ठानिक ब्राह्मणीय गोत्र — जो सप्तर्षि-परम्परा पर आधारित है एवं विवाह-निषेध का निर्धारण करता है — से भिन्न संस्था है। तथापि भाट-बही की वर्गीकरण-प्रणाली ने इन दोनों को जानबूझकर एकीकृत किया: महाभारत के शान्ति-पर्व (अध्याय 297, श्लोक 17) में वर्णित चतुर्मूल-गोत्र-सिद्धान्त — 'मूलगोत्राणि चत्वारि समुत्पन्नानि भारत। अङ्गिराः कश्यपश्चैव वसिष्ठो भृगुरेव च॥ कर्मतस्त्वन्यानि गोत्राणि समुत्पन्नानि पार्थिव। नामधेयानि तपसा तानि च ग्रहणं विदुः॥' — अर्थात् आङ्गिरस, काश्यप, वसिष्ठ एवं भृगु ये चार मूल-गोत्र हैं एवं शेष समस्त गोत्र कर्म अथवा शाखा-विस्तार से परवर्ती काल में उत्पन्न हुए — इस पौराणिक प्रामाणिकता को भाट-परम्परा ने अपनी 'असल गोत्र' की संकल्पना के वैचारिक आधार के रूप में आत्मसात् किया, जिससे प्रत्येक जाति के भीतर 'चार असल गोत' की संख्या ब्रह्माण्डशास्त्रीय अपरिहार्यता का रूप ग्रहण कर सके। इसी मध्य, ढाई का आँकड़ा इसीलिए माना गया, क्योंकि तीन का आँकड़ा अशुभ माना जाता है। इब्बेटसन ने गुज्जर जाति में ढाई असल गोत्र होने की जानकारी दी।

राजपूत वंश से उत्पन्न बताया जाता था एवं उनके भी कुछ भिन्न गोत्र 'असल' घोषित किये जाते थे। 'असल' की संज्ञा इस प्रकार सदैव किसी अन्य गोत्र को दी जाती थी, स्वयं के गोत्र को कभी नहीं। यह एक बन्द तार्किक वृत्त था जिसमें कोई भी गोत्र अपनी ही बही में मूल सिद्ध नहीं हो सकता था।[32] यह संरचना आकस्मिक नहीं थी। यदि कोई गोत्र स्वयं को 'असल' बता सकता, तो वह राजपूत-मूल से स्वतन्त्र होता एवं व्यवस्था की केन्द्रीय धुरी — राजपूत श्रेष्ठता — संकट में पड़ती। 'असल' की स्थायी अनुपस्थिति व्यवस्था का दोष नहीं, उसका अभिकल्पित गुण था।

इस बन्द तार्किक वृत्त की ज्ञान-मीमांसीय गहराई को समझने के लिए फ़ूको की 'regime of truth' की अवधारणा उपयोगी है। प्रत्येक समाज में एक ऐसा तन्त्र होता है जो यह निर्धारित करता है कि कौन-से कथन 'सत्य' माने जाएँगे, किन माध्यमों से सत्य उत्पादित होगा, एवं कौन उसे प्रमाणित करने का अधिकार रखता है।[33] नख-व्यवस्था ने उत्तर-पश्चिम भारत में जाति-उद्भव के विषय में ठीक ऐसा ही एक 'सत्य का शासन' निर्मित किया था। इस शासन की शक्ति उसकी वृत्ताकार प्रमाण-शृंखला में निहित थी: बही का एकमात्र प्रमाण बही स्वयं थी — और वह भाट की पैतृक सम्पत्ति भी थी। जब नैणसी ने भाट-बहियों को अपनी ख्यात का आधार बनाया, तो उन बहियों की सामग्री एक प्रशासनिक अभिलेख में संहिताबद्ध हुई। जब औपनिवेशिक जनगणना-अधिकारियों ने नैणसी की ख्यात एवं उस जैसे ग्रन्थों का उपयोग किया, तो वह संहिताबद्ध सामग्री 'ऐतिहासिक तथ्य' बनी। जब उन जनगणना-अभिलेखों के आधार पर जातियों ने अपनी सामाजिक पहचान निर्धारित की, तो वह 'तथ्य' समुदायों की आत्म-धारणा का अंग बना। प्रमाण-शृंखला की पाँच कड़ियाँ — भाट-बही, नैणसी की ख्यात, औपनिवेशिक नृवंशविज्ञान, जनगणना-अभिलेख एवं सामुदायिक आत्म-धारणा — बन्द वृत्त में परिणत हुईं जिसका कोई स्वतन्त्र बाह्य आधार नहीं था।

यह वह संरचना है जिसने व्यवस्था के राजनीतिक निर्माण को स्वयंसिद्ध ऐतिहासिक तथ्य का रूप दिया; यही इस शोधपत्र की केन्द्रीय ज्ञान-मीमांसीय स्थापना है।

## नख-व्यवस्था का सामाजिक एवं भौगोलिक विस्तार

नख-व्यवस्था की वास्तविक शक्ति उसके सामाजिक एवं भौगोलिक विस्तार में प्रमाणित होती है। यदि यह व्यवस्था केवल मारवाड़ के राजपूत राजघरानों की आन्तरिक वंशावली-प्रणाली होती, तो इस शोधपत्र का

[32] उदाहरण-स्वरूप: गोत्र 'क' की बही में 'ख' असल; 'ख' की बही में 'ग' असल; 'ग' की बही में 'क' असल। जैसा कि पूर्व में प्रदर्शित किया, कहीं पर पूनिया जाट गोत्र की उत्पत्ति शिव की जटा से बताई जाती है, वहीं स्वयं पूनियाओं की बही में उनको चौहान बताया जाता है। नैणसी ने गोदारा को एक असल जाट गोत्र बताया है, वहीं स्वयं गोदाराओं की बही में उनको गहलोत बताया जाता है।

[33] Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 109–33.

केन्द्रीय तर्क स्वयमेव सीमित रहता। किन्तु ऐतिहासिक साक्ष्य यह प्रदर्शित करते हैं कि यह व्यवस्था उपमहाद्वीप के विविध भौगोलिक क्षेत्रों में (पश्चिमी पंजाब से महाराष्ट्र तक) एवं सामाजिक स्तरों (राजवंश से सेवा-जाति तक; हिन्दू से मुसलमान तक) में एक ही तर्क-संरचना सहित कार्यशील थी, अर्थात्: एक उभरता राजनीतिक समूह, एक भाट-निर्मित संयोजक पूर्वज, एवं वह भाट-तन्त्र जो उस समूह को किसी प्रतिष्ठित राजपूत कुल-वृक्ष में अधीनस्थ शाखा के रूप में स्थापित करता था। यह शोधपत्र इस विस्तार को सात प्रकरण-अध्ययनों के माध्यम से परीक्षित करता है, जिनकी कालक्रमिक सीमा दो अभिलेखों से निर्धारित होती है: आईन-ए-अकबरी (लगभग 1595 ई.) एवं 1881 ई. की ब्रिटिश जनगणना। इन दोनों के मध्य जो अन्तराल है, वही नख-व्यवस्था के सामाजिक एवं भौगोलिक विस्तार का सर्वाधिक ठोस ऐतिहासिक साक्ष्य है।

## आईन-ए-अकबरी: सतलुज के पश्चिम में 'राजपूत'

प्रो॰ ज़हूर अली ख़ाँ ने 1997 ई. में *आईन-ए-अकबरी* की प्रान्तीय सांख्यिकीय तालिकाओं के आधार पर पंजाब की ज़मींदार जातियों के वितरण का मानचित्रण किया। उनका निष्कर्ष यह है कि सोलहवीं शताब्दी तक 'राजपूत' श्रेणी मुख्यतः हिमाचल प्रदेश एवं सतलुज के दक्षिण-पूर्वी क्षेत्र तक सीमित थी।[34] भाटी केवल सतलुज-ब्यास के द्विनद-बेसिन तक एवं रांघड़ (जिन्हें डेंज़िल इब्बेटसन मुस्लिम राजपूत के रूप में वर्गीकृत करते हैं) सतलुज एवं यमुना के मध्यवर्ती क्षेत्र तक संकुचित थे। इब्बेटसन ने झेलम एवं सतलुज के मध्य जाटों के उपरान्त द्वितीय सर्वाधिक व्यापक खोखर ज़मींदारों के विषय में 'सामान्य अनिश्चितता' अंकित की है। उनके अनुसार वे राजपूत हैं, जाट हैं, अथवा स्वतन्त्र वंश हैं। यह अनिश्चितता इस बात का प्रमाण है कि सोलहवीं शताब्दी तक खोखर 'राजपूत' श्रेणी में समाहित नहीं हुए थे।

नमक-पर्वतश्रृंखला के केन्द्रीय भाग में जंजुआ एवं उसके पश्चिमी पार्श्व पर आवान, दोनों अपने-अपने जाति-अभिधान से ज़मींदारों के रूप में अभिलेखित हैं, 'राजपूत' के रूप में नहीं।[35] पश्चिमी पंजाब के वे जाट गोत्र, सियाल सहित, जो परवर्ती शताब्दियों में 'मुस्लिम राजपूत' के रूप में पहचाने जाने वाले थे, आईन की तालिकाओं में जाट श्रेणी के अन्तर्गत ही अंकित हैं। मुग़ल अभिलेखों में सतलुज के पश्चिम में 'राजपूत' पहचान अनुपस्थित थी। 1881 ई. की ब्रिटिश जनगणना तक वही क्षेत्र 'मुस्लिम राजपूत'-बहुल हुआ था। यह अन्तराल केवल वर्गीकरण-पद्धति का परिवर्तन नहीं, अपितु ऊपरी खंड में विश्लेषित संयोजक-पूर्वज

[34] Zahoor Ali Khan, "Zamindari Caste Configuration in the Punjab, c. 1595—Mapping the Data in the *A'in-i Akbari*," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 58 (1997): 336, http://www.jstor.org/stable/44143925.

[35] इब्बेटसन ने पाया कि इस काल तक अलग-अलग जंजुआ कुटुम्ब, खोखरों की ही भाँति, अपने आपको विदेशी, राजपूत अथवा जाट — तीनों श्रेणियों में से किसी एक पहचान के साथ जोड़ रहे थे; देखें, *Panjab Castes* (Lahore: Superintendent, Government Printing, Punjab, 1916), 102, 109, 113.

यान्त्रिकी का कालक्रमिक साक्ष्य है। प्रो॰ ख़ाँ का विश्लेषण उस प्रक्रिया का शून्य-बिन्दु स्थापित करता है जिसका विस्तार आगे  प्रदर्शित किया गया है।

## पंजाब: सहचर इस्लामीकरण एवं राजपूतीकरण

रिचर्ड एम. ईटन ने *जवाहिर-ए-फ़रीदी* (1623 ई.) के साक्ष्यों के आधार पर यह प्रदर्शित किया है कि पाकपत्तन की सूफ़ी दरगाह के प्रभाव-मण्डल में खोखर, भाटी, डुढी इत्यादि जाट-कुलों का इस्लामीकरण एवं राजपूतीकरण समानान्तर प्रक्रियाओं के रूप में घटित हुए। पंजाब में ये परस्पर-विरुद्ध नहीं, अपितु एक ही सामाजिक तर्क के युगपत् पक्ष थे।[36] इस तर्क का मूल हिन्दू वर्ण-संरचना में था, जिसमें राजपूत-श्रेणी से च्युति के दो ही मान्य मार्ग थे: स्वजाति से बाहर विवाह अथवा अपात्र वृत्ति-ग्रहण। किन्तु इस्लाम वर्ण-व्यवस्था को मान्यता नहीं देता। अतः एक मुस्लिम परिवार निर्विघ्न यह दावा कर सकता था कि उसका रक्त राजपूत पूर्वज का एवं आचार-मर्यादा इस्लामी है। किन्तु भाट-बही में अंकित वंश-क्रम उस दावे को खण्डनातीत ऐतिहासिक सत्य का स्वरूप प्रदान करता था।

सिन्थिया टाल्बॉट ने क़ायम ख़ाँ रासो के विश्लेषण में यह प्रदर्शित किया है कि फ़तेहपुर-झुंझुनू के क़ायमख़ानी शासक एक साथ मुस्लिम एवं चौहान राजपूत थे, एवं देशज और मुग़लकालीन दोनों राजनीतिक क्षेत्रों में वैध भागीदार थे।[37] मेवात के ख़ानज़ादा इसी तर्क का पृथक् प्रमाण थे। हसन ख़ाँ मेवाती, जिन्होंने ख़ानवा (1527 ई.) में राणा साँगा के पक्ष में युद्ध किया, यदुवंशी जदौन राजपूत के रूप में अपनी पहचान धारण करते थे।[38] तदनुरूप, जैसा कि शैल मायाराम एवं सूरजभान भारद्वाज ने प्रदर्शित किया, अनेकों मेवाती गोत्र अथवा 'पाल' स्वयं को चौहान, तंवर, भाटी, कछवाहा, सोलंकी राजपूत वंशों से भी जोड़ते थे।[39] इब्बेटसन ने इस प्रक्रिया

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[36] Richard M. Eaton, "Reconsidering 'Conversion to Islam' in Indian History," in *Islamisation: Comparative Perspectives from History*, ed. A.C.S. Peacock (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 386.

[37] Cynthia Talbot, "Becoming Turk the Rajput Way: Conversion and Identity in an Indian Warrior Narrative," *Modern Asian Studies* 43, no. 1 (2009): 211, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20488077.

[38] Altaf Hussain, "Khanzadas of Mewat: An Ethno-Historical Overview," *Journal of Advances and Scholarly Researches in Allied Education* 15, no. 12 (December 2018): 675.

[39] Shail Mayaram, *Resisting Regimes: Myth, Memory and the Shaping of a Muslim Identity* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 31, 41–42; Suraj Bhan Bhardwaj, *Contestations and Accommodations: Mewat and Meos in Mughal India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016), 100, fn 56, 116–17; idem, *State and Peasant Society in Medieval North India: Essays on Changing Contours of Mewat, Thirteenth to Eighteenth Century* (Delhi: Primus Books, 2019). भारद्वाज यह भी प्रदर्शित करते हैं कि मेव पालों की मौखिक परम्पराएँ अठारहवीं-उन्नीसवीं शताब्दी के सन्धिकाल में मीरासी समुदाय द्वारा निर्मित थीं एवं मेव चौधरियों ने राजपूतों के अनुकरण पर अपने पालों का बार्डिक इतिहास प्रायोजित करना आरम्भ किया था (ibid., पृ.

की स्वतन्त्र नृवंशविज्ञानीय पुष्टि की, किन्तु एक अनिवार्य भौगोलिक परिसीमन सहित: पश्चिमी पंजाब में, जहाँ ब्राह्मणीय संस्थाएँ ऐतिहासिक रूप से शिथिल थीं, एक ही मुस्लिम जाट जनजाति एक दशक में 'राजपूत' एवं दूसरे में 'जाट' के रूप में अभिलेखित हो सकती थी। पूर्वी पंजाब में यह सम्भव नहीं था। नख-व्यवस्था ने उस सामाजिक तरलता को अभिलेखित वास्तविकता में परिणत की।

इन प्रकरणों से नख-व्यवस्था की एक मूलभूत विशेषता उद्घाटित होती है। ग्रामीण एवं भूमिधारक परिवारों के लिए इस्लाम-ग्रहण एक बाह्य घटना थी। उनकी आन्तरिक देशी पदानुक्रम-चेतना यथावत् बनी रही। उनका दैनिक सामाजिक जीवन, ज़मींदारी, ग्राम-राजनीति, विवाह-सम्बन्ध एवं भूमि-अधिकार, उसी ब्राह्मणिक ढाँचे के भीतर संचालित होता रहा जिसमें राजपूत ब्राह्मणों के ठीक अधोभाग में स्थित थे। इस्लाम ने उनकी आध्यात्मिक पहचान बदली, उनकी सामाजिक पारिस्थितिकी नहीं। साथ ही हिन्दू राजपूतों को इन मुस्लिम समुदायों के वंश-दावों से कोई सामाजिक प्रतिस्पर्धा नहीं थी। अतः 'राजपूत-धर्म से च्युति' की वह कथा, जो हिन्दू समुदायों के लिए अनिवार्य थी, यहाँ सर्वथा अनुपस्थित रही। इन दोनों कारणों से जब इन परिवारों की बहियाँ निर्मित हुईं तो वे उसी भाट-परम्परा के प्रारूप में निर्मित हुईं। रावजी आज भी इन कुटुम्बों में जाते हैं, बही बाँचते हैं एवं नवीन प्रविष्टियाँ करते हैं। इनकी राजपूत पहचान किसी राजनीतिक दावे की औपचारिकता नहीं, अपितु उनकी जीवित सामाजिक वास्तविकता है। इस प्रकार इस्लामीकरण एवं राजपूतीकरण युगपत् प्रक्रियाएँ सिद्ध हुईं, एवं भाट-बही ने नख के माध्यम से इस युगपत्ता को संस्थागत रूप प्रदान किया।

## भाटी कुल: राजपूतीकरण का प्रतीक

पिछले कथन में यह स्थापित किया गया कि 1595 ई. में भाटी भौगोलिक दृष्टि से सतलुज-ब्यास-बेसिन तक सीमित थे। ज़िगलर ने प्रदर्शित किया है कि इस भौगोलिक सीमा के बावजूद भाटी वंशावली-परम्परा ने जो विस्तार किया, वह केवल एक राजपूत कुल की वैधता-अन्वेषण नहीं था, अपितु यदुवंशी कुल-वृक्ष के प्रधान उत्तराधिकारी के रूप में स्वयं को स्थापित करने की एक सुचिन्तित परियोजना थी। इस परियोजना का

115). ख़ानज़ादाओं के यदुवंशी जदौन उद्गम के लिए भी भारद्वाज का विश्लेषण द्रष्टव्य है: बहादुर नाहर — जो मूलतः जदौन राजपूत थे — फ़िरोज़ शाह तुग़लक की अभिजात-सूची में 'ख़ानज़ाद' के रूप में सम्मिलित हुए, जो भाट-बही से स्वतन्त्र एवं पूर्ववर्ती फ़ारसी राजकीय साक्ष्य है; Bhardwaj, *Contestations and Accommodations*, Chapter 1. यहाँ यह बताना महत्त्वपूर्ण है कि मीरासी समुदाय के लोग जाट जाति के लिए भी वंशावलियाँ रखते एवं उनका वाचन करते हैं, यद्यपि उनका वाचन प्रायः मौखिक स्वरूप का होता है। तथापि जाट जाति के लोग भाट द्वारा रखी गई वंशावलियों को अधिक प्रामाणिक मानते हैं। इसका मूल कारण संरक्षण का अन्तर है: भाट-संस्था शताब्दियों से राजपूत राजाओं एवं ज़मींदारों के प्रत्यक्ष संरक्षण में विकसित हुई थी — उनकी बहियाँ राजकीय विवादों में प्रमाण-स्वरूप स्वीकृत होती थीं, उन्हें 'भाट राजा' की उपाधि प्राप्त थी एवं उनके अभिलेखों को मुग़ल प्रशासन ने भी मान्यता प्रदान की थी। मीरासी परम्परा में यह राजकीय एवं संस्थागत संरक्षण कभी प्राप्त नहीं हुआ। इस प्रकार भाट-बही की प्रामाणिकता भाट-लेखन के किसी अन्तर्निहित गुण का परिणाम नहीं, बल्कि उस राजपूत संरक्षण-तन्त्र की देन है जिसके विश्लेषण पर यह आलेख आधारित है।

ब्रह्माण्डशास्त्रीय आधार *नैणसी री ख्यात* में अभिलेखित था। भाटी कृष्ण-पुत्र प्रद्युम्न से उत्पन्न यदुवंशी थे, जिनका समरकन्द तक अधिकार था। इसी आधार पर जैसलमेर राजवंश की वंशावली-बही के अनुसार जब भाटी शासक राजा भूपत के वंशज मुसलमान हुए, तो उनके वंशज चगताई मुग़ल कहलाए। सुल्तान मुहम्मद ग़ोरी को भी चगताई वंशी भाटी बताया गया,[40] जिसकी पुष्टि नैणसी भी करते हैं।[41] इस दावे का व्यावहारिक परिणाम निर्णायक था: मुग़ल सम्राट की सेवा अब विदेशी सत्ता के समक्ष आत्मसमर्पण नहीं, अपितु उसी व्यापक कुटुम्ब के भीतर एक ज्येष्ठ की सेवा थी। इस उद्यम की कोई सैद्धान्तिक सीमा नहीं थी। पूगल का इतिहास के परिशिष्ट में भाटी वंश से च्युत एक सौ चालीस से अधिक खाँपें अभिलेखित हैं जो 'पतित' श्रेणी की आन्तरिक स्वीकृति एवं वंश-वृक्ष विस्तार की संरचनागत अनिवार्यता, दोनों का प्रमाण है।[42] ब्रिटिश काल तक भाटी पंजाब के विस्तृत भूभाग में मुस्लिम एवं सिख भाटी के रूप में विद्यमान थे; पूगल का इतिहास कहता है कि कपूरथला एवं पटियाला के राजवंश 'सिख होते हुए भी यदुवंशी भाटी हैं'। इस तथ्य का विस्तृत विश्लेषण अगले भाग में प्रस्तुत है।

## फुलकियाँ राजवंश: 'यदुवंश वतंस भाटी कुल भूषण'

पटियाला, कपूरथला, फ़रीदकोट, कैथल, नाभा एवं जींद राजवंशों का उद्भव एक सिद्धू-बराड़ जाट परिवार से हुआ, जिसके संस्थापक चौधरी फूल थे। भाट-परम्परा के अनुसार सिद्धू गोत्र का आदि-पुरुष 'खीवा राव' नामक एक भाटी राजपूत था, जिसने एक सराव जाट सरदार की पुत्री से विवाह किया एवं इस कारण अपने राजपूत समाज से बहिष्कृत हुआ। खीवा राव का पुत्र माता के कुल के कारण 'जाट' कहलाया एवं सिद्धू गोत्र का प्रवर्तक बना, जो संयोजक-पूर्वज यान्त्रिकी का अनुकरणीय उदाहरण है।[43]

राजनीतिक शक्ति-प्राप्ति के साथ यह दावा जैसलमेर के रावल जैसल से प्रत्यक्ष वंश-सम्बन्ध तक विस्तृत हुआ। इस वंश-दावे में दो कड़ियाँ थीं। निचली कड़ी, हेम हेल से चौधरी फूल तक, स्थानीय भाट-परम्परा में विद्यमान थी। किन्तु ऊपरी ब्रह्माण्डशास्त्रीय कड़ी, कृष्ण से प्रद्युम्न, तत्पश्चात् राव भाटी से जैसल तक, के

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[40] लखमीचन्द, *तवारीख जैसलमेर*, 13.

[41] मुंहता नैणसी, *नैणसी री ख्यात*, भाग ३, सम्पा. बदरीप्रसाद साकरिया (जोधपुर: राजस्थान प्राच्यविद्या प्रतिष्ठान, 1964), पृ. 37.

[42] इन खाँपों में सेंवर, बेनीवाल, सारण, मूढ, शिवड़, खुल्लरिया जाट; आल, देवासी राईका; माकड, माहण सुथार; फूल नाई; केवल कुम्हार; राखेचा ओसवाल; डूला-डागा-चूड़ा माहेश्वरी; अबोहरिया, उभेचड़ा मुसलमान; भाटिया पञ्जाबी इत्यादि सम्मिलित हैं। यहाँ पर यह टिप्पणी करना भी उचित होगा कि किसी जाति के एक ही गोत्र के एक से अधिक नख हो सकते हैं; उदाहरणस्वरूप कुछ बेनीवाल जाट कुटुम्ब भाटी नख के एवं अन्य बेनीवाल जाट कुटुम्ब चौहान नख में सम्मिलित हैं। देखें: हरि सिंह भाटी, *पूगल का इतिहास* (बीकानेर: स्व-प्रकाशन, 1989), परिशिष्ट — 'भाटियों की खाँपें', 65–66.

[43] Ahmad Shah Batalvi, "Zikr-i-Guruan wa Ibtida-i-Singhan wa Mazhab-i-Eshan," in *Umdat-ut-Twarikh*, by Sohan Lal Suri, vol. 1 (Lahore: Arya Press, 1885), 18–24.

बिना पटियाला एवं कृष्ण के बीच की वंश-रेखा अपूर्ण रहती। पटियाला नरेशों की उपाधि 'यदुवंश वतंस भाटी कुल भूषण' इस सम्पूर्ण वंश-दावे का राजकीय घोषणापत्र थी। यद्यपि, इस राजवंश का आरम्भिक इतिहास तथ्य से अधिक मिथक-मिश्रित है। इस दावे की दीर्घजीविता तीन स्वतन्त्र साक्ष्यों में प्रमाणित होती है। 1932 ई. में जदुनाथ सरकार ने लिखा कि पटियाला का शोध-उद्देश्य 'शुद्ध क्षत्रिय अथवा राजपूत' सिद्ध होना है।[44] 1942 ई. में पटियाला राज्य ने जैसलमेर से भाट-बहियों पर आधारित वंशावली एवं चारण-वंश-वृक्ष, दोनों एक साथ, अभियाचित किये। यह दोहरा प्रमाणीकरण उस ऊपरी ब्रह्माण्डशास्त्रीय कड़ी की आवश्यकता का प्रत्यक्ष प्रमाण है।[45] तृतीयतः खुशवन्त सिंह ने कैप्टेन अमरिन्दर सिंह की जीवनी में 'समस्त जाट गोत्रों की भाँति' लिखकर इस दावे को सामान्य ज्ञान के रूप में अंकित किया।[46] बही से प्रशासनिक पत्र-व्यवहार, वहाँ से मुद्रित जीवनी तक का माध्यम बदला, यान्त्रिकी नहीं।

## भरतपुर के सिनसिनवार जाट एवं करौली राजकुल

भरतपुर के सिनसिनवार राजवंश की परम्परा के अनुसार उनके पूर्वज बालचन्द, एक यदुवंशी जदौन राजपूत एवं करौली राजकुल के आदि-पुरुष सिन्दपाल के वंशज, ने एक सरौत-गोत्री-जाट स्त्री की डोली का अपहरण कर उसे पत्नी बनाया। उस मिलन से उत्पन्न पुत्र माता के कुल के कारण 'जाट' कहलाया एवं सिनसिनवार

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[44] Hari Ram Gupta, ed., *Life and Letters of Sir Jadunath Sarkar*, vol. 1 (Hoshiarpur: Panjab University, 1957), 165.

[45] Patiala State Government, "D.O. Letter No. 10966 regarding Jaisalmer Ruling Family Genealogy," 29 September 1942, Record Group: Princely State Records, Punjab State Archives, Patiala. यहाँ यह उल्लेखनीय है कि जैसलमेर के भाटी राजवंश की वंशावली-बहियों की सूची में मूढ़, शिवड़, खुल्लरिया, सेंवर, सारण सहित अनेक जाट गोत्रों के नाम अंकित हैं; किन्तु सिद्धू गोत्र — जिस पर फुलकियाँ राजवंश का समस्त वंश-दावा आधारित है — उसमें पूर्णतः अनुपस्थित है।

[46] Khushwant Singh, *Captain Amarinder Singh: The People's Maharaja: An Authorized Biography* (New Delhi: Hay House India, 2017), 1. वास्तव में पंजाब प्रान्त के शिक्षित जाटों पर भाटों की बहियों का एवं औपनिवेशिक नृवंशविज्ञान का इतना गहरा प्रभाव पड़ा कि भाई कानसिंह नाभा ने सिखों के *महानकोश* में पंजाब के सभी सिख-जाट गोत्रों को राजस्थान की राजपूत मूल का होना अंकित किया। इब्बेटसन की यह टिप्पणी बारम्बार दोहराई जाने लगी कि जाट एवं राजपूत, दोनों एक ही जनजाति है (शक मूल की), जिनके मध्य मूलभेद इतना सा है कि राजपूत विधवा-विवाह को प्रतिबंधित करते हैं, किन्तु जाट नहीं। राजस्थान के बाहर नख व्यवस्था सबसे अधिक सफल जाटों में हुई, जिसका प्रमुख कारण यह था कि राजस्थान के भाट पहले से ही राजस्थान के जाटों से परिचित थे, इसलिए उनके लिये राजस्थान के बाहर के जाटों के साथ मेलझोल स्थापित करना मनोवैज्ञानिक रूप से सरल हो गया था। दूसरा कारण यह था कि जाटों की आर्थिक स्थिति तुलनात्मक रूप से अच्छी होने के कारण भाटों को उनके वंशावली लेखन एवं वाचन से अधिक आय मिल सकती थी। तीसरा कारण यह था कि मुग़ल काल के शुरुआत तक जाट सम्पूर्ण बागड़ क्षेत्र के शासक थे और मुग़ल काल में भी उनके पास बड़ी संख्या में ज़मींदारियाँ थीं, जैसा कि प्रो॰ ख़ाँ ने अपने उपर्युक्त शोधपत्र में प्रदर्शित किया, सो स्वयं राजपूत राजा — जो भाटों के प्रमुख संरक्षक थे — जाटों को राजपूत मूल के घोषित करवाने के लिए उतावले थे।

गोत्र धारण किया।[47] यह आख्यान एक साथ तीन कार्य सम्पन्न करता है। पितृ-रक्त से राजपूत-सम्बन्ध, मातृ-कुल से वर्तमान जाट-पहचान की व्याख्या, एवं नवोदित कुल पर अपमान-मुद्रा। जदौन राजपूत ब्रज-मथुरा-करौली क्षेत्र की प्रभावी क्षत्रिय-सत्ता थे। इस करौली-सम्बन्ध का व्यावहारिक फल यह था कि मथुरा-वृन्दावन में कृष्ण-वंश के दावेदार के रूप में भरतपुर नरेशों को एक धार्मिक-सांस्कृतिक वैधता प्राप्त थी जो सैन्य-शक्ति से नहीं, अपितु केवल भाट-बही के जदौन-वंश-क्रम से सम्भव थी। पिछले भाग में विस्तृत किये गए सिद्धू-वृत्तान्त के विपरीत यहाँ अपमान-मुद्रा की उपस्थिति यह सिद्ध करती है कि यह आख्यान सिनसिनवारों का अपना नहीं, अपितु सम्भवतः प्रतिस्पर्धी कुलों के भाटों द्वारा प्रसारित था।

इस संयोजक-पूर्वज की कृत्रिमता का प्रमाण नामकरण-तर्क से मिलता है। जदौन परम्परा में पूर्वजों के नाम में 'पाल' प्रत्यय था, सिन्दपाल, ब्रह्मपाल, धर्मपाल। किन्तु 'बालचन्द' नाम में यह प्रत्यय अनुपस्थित है। राम पाण्डे का यह तर्क कि यह आख्यान जाट-आन्तरिक श्रेष्ठता के लिए निर्मित था,[48] असंगत है। क्योंकि, बदन सिंह एवं सूरजमल के उत्थान से पूर्व ही सिनसिनवार बही में जदौन-सम्बन्ध अभिलेखित था। अर्थात्, भाट-बही शक्ति-प्राप्ति का साधन थी, उसका उत्पाद नहीं। ब्रज में उनके क्षेत्रीय प्राधान्य के कारण यह आख्यान समग्र ब्रज के जाट गोत्रों का वंशावली-प्रतिमान बना। कर्नल जेम्ज़ टॉड ने लिखा कि 'आगरा प्रान्त के जाट' स्वयं को बयाना के यादुओं (जदौन) के अनौरस वंशज मानते थे एवं अपना उद्गम-स्थान कंधार बताते थे। जदौन राजपूत अपनी वंशावली भाटी परम्परा से जोड़ते थे एवं भाटी अपना आदि-राज्य ग़ज़नी-कंधार क्षेत्र में मानते थे।[49] यह आत्मसातीकरण इतना गहरा था कि जाट ज़मींदारों को यह आत्म-पहचान प्रसारित करने के लिए न भाट की अपेक्षा थी, न बही की। नख-व्यवस्था ने अपना संस्थागत उपकरण अनावश्यक किया था। इस कारणवश यह समुदाय स्वयं अपनी बही बना था।

## शिवाजी भोंसले एवं सिसोदिया वंश-दावा

नख-व्यवस्था के सामाजिक एवं भौगोलिक विस्तार का सर्वाधिक नाटकीय उदाहरण 1674 ई. का शिवाजी-राज्याभिषेक है। राज्याभिषेक की क्षत्रिय-वैधता के लिए शिवाजी के सचिव बालाजी आवजी चिटणीस को मेवाड़ के सिसोदिया वंश-अभिलेखों के निरीक्षण हेतु भेजा गया। वे इस 'अनुकूल' निष्कर्ष के साथ लौटे कि

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[47] Tony McClenaghan, *Indian Princely Medals: A Record of the Orders, Decorations, and Medals of the Indian Princely States* (New Delhi: Lancer Publishers, 1996), 70. 'सिनसिनवार' अथवा सिनसिनवाल वस्तुतः 'सिनसिनी ग्राम के निवासी' का भौगोलिक-विशेषण है। दक्षिण एशिया में अनेकों जातियों, उपजातियों अथवा गोत्रों की पहचान उनके मौलिक गृह क्षेत्रों के नामों के आधार पर हैं।

[48] Ram Pande, *Bharatpur up to 1826: Social and Political History of the Jats* (Jaipur: Rama Publishing House, 1970), 29.

[49] James Tod, *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan, or the Central and Western Rajput States of India*, ed. William Crooke, vol. 2 (London: Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, 1920), 1126, fn1.

शाहजी भोंसले 'चाचो सिसोदिया' के वंशज थे। तत्पश्चात् काशी के ब्राह्मण विद्वान् गागा भट्ट ने एक सौ से अधिक पीढ़ियों का वंश-क्रम प्रस्तुत किया, जिसे जदुनाथ सरकार, जी॰ एस॰ सरदेसाई, स्टुअर्ट गॉर्डन एवं ऑड्री ट्रुश्के सहित समस्त प्रमुख इतिहासकार कृत्रिम मानते हैं। गॉर्डन गागा भट्ट को 'एक सृजनशील ब्राह्मण' कहते हैं।[50] राज्याभिषेक के अनुष्ठान में शिवाजी को तीन कार्य क्रमशः सम्पन्न करने पड़े: जनेऊ-संस्कार, राजपूत रीति से पुनर्विवाह एवं अभिषेक। इसके विपरीत, आधुनिक शोध भोंसले कुल को कुन्बी किसान-परम्परा से उत्पन्न मानता है।[51]

यद्यपि भोंसले के अतिरिक्त अनेक अन्य शहाण्णव कुळी मराठा कुटुम्ब अपनी उत्पत्ति उत्तर भारतीय राजपूत वंशों, यथा परमार, सोलंकी, चौहान, सिसोदिया, गौड़ एवं जदौन-भाटी, से जोड़ते हैं। तथापि, इन दावों का मराठा सामाजिक-राजनीतिक इतिहास पर कोई विशेष प्रभाव नहीं पड़ा।[52] ये वंश-दावे सम्भवतः इस उद्देश्य से निर्मित किए गए थे कि मुग़ल अभिजात-वर्ग की दृष्टि में मराठों को कृषक-समुदाय मात्र न समझा जाए। अपितु, उन्हें उन राजपूत वंशों के समकक्ष प्रस्तुत किया जा सके, जिन्हें वंशानुगत हिन्दू शासक-वर्ग के रूप में मान्यता प्राप्त थी। मराठा शासक कुटुम्बों ने अपनी राजनीतिक वैधता मूलतः महाराष्ट्र की भक्ति-परम्परा, संत तुकाराम, समर्थ रामदास, ज्ञानेश्वर एवं नामदेव, से सम्बद्ध सांस्कृतिक आदर्शों के माध्यम से अर्जित की; जिन आदर्शों से 'महाराष्ट्र धर्म' की अवधारणा विकसित हुई।

शिवाजी-प्रकरण एकमात्र अपवाद नहीं था। मुग़ल-काल में गहलोत-सिसोदिया राजवंश हिन्दू राजनीतिक प्राचीनता का प्रतीक बना था। तेलुगु-भाषी राजू जाति से सम्बन्धित विजयनगर राजवंश स्वयं को उदयपुर के

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[50] Stewart Gordon, *The Marathas 1600–1818*, vol. II.4 of *The New Cambridge History of India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 88.

[51] *Maharaja of Kolhapur v. S. Sundaram Ayyar and Others*, AIR 1925 Mad 497; Govind Pansare, "Shivaji's Quest for Hindu Validation," *The Caravan*, 4 October 2015, https://caravanmagazine.in/vantage/shivaji-quest-hindu-validation.

[52] शिवाजी के वंशजों ने ही दो पृथक् अवसरों पर — *Subrao Hambirrao Patil v. Radha Hambirrao Patil* (Bombay High Court, 1928) एवं *Maharaja of Kolhapur v. S. Sundaram Ayyar* (Madras High Court, 1925) में — स्वयं अपने राजपूत-वंश-दावे को न्यायालय में चुनौती दी। किन्तु यह सामाजिक लज्जा अथवा ऐतिहासिक अस्वीकृति से प्रेरित नहीं था; इसका कारण सर्वथा आर्थिक था: राजपूत को क्षत्रिय मान लिये जाने के पश्चात् हिन्दू विधि के अन्तर्गत उन पर ज्येष्ठाधिकार-विधि (law of *primogeniture*) लागू होती थी, जिसके अनुसार पितृ-सम्पत्ति में केवल ज्येष्ठ पुत्र का अधिकार था। कनिष्ठ पुत्र इस विधि से वंचित थे; यदि परिवार को शूद्र घोषित किया जाता, तो शूद्र उत्तराधिकार-विधि के अन्तर्गत सभी पुत्र सम्पत्ति में भागीदार होते। अर्थात् उन्होंने राजपूत-दावे को इसलिए नहीं नकारा कि वे उससे लज्जित थे — उन्होंने उसे इसलिए नकारा कि वह दावा उस क्षण आर्थिक दृष्टि से प्रतिकूल था। यह व्युत्क्रमणीयता — एक ही वंश-दावे का राजनीतिक सुविधा के अनुसार ग्रहण एवं त्याग — शोधपत्र के उस केन्द्रीय तर्क की पुष्टि करती है कि वंशावली एक राजनीतिक उपकरण है, ऐतिहासिक अभिलेख नहीं।

राणाओं से उत्पन्न मानता था।[53] नेपाल के 'प्रधानमन्त्री वंश' के राणा ने 1848 ई. की राजकीय लाल-मोहर द्वारा घोषित किया कि उनके पूर्वज 1303 ई. की चित्तौड़गढ़ घेराबन्दी के समय रावल रत्नसिंह के कनिष्ठ भ्राता थे; एवं इस प्रकार एक खस-कुँवर परिवार ने स्वयं को सूर्यवंशी राजपूत अभिजात के रूप में पुनर्स्थापित किया।[54] इन प्रकरणों में भाट-बही-तन्त्र नहीं, अपितु ब्राह्मण विद्वान् एवं राजकीय घोषणाएँ माध्यम थे। किन्तु, फिर भी, तर्क-संरचना अभिन्न थी; एक उभरता राजनीतिक समूह, एक निर्मित वंश-सम्बन्ध, एवं मेवाड़ की सिसोदिया वंशावली की ओर उन्मुखता। सत्रहवीं शताब्दी के मध्य तक राजस्थानी वंशावली-लेखन परम्परा उपमहाद्वीपीय प्रामाणिकता का एकमात्र स्रोत बनी थी। यह तथ्य नख-व्यवस्था की सीमा एवं विस्तार, दोनों का प्रमाण है।

## औपनिवेशिक जनगणना एवं नृवंशविज्ञान-साहित्य

नख-व्यवस्था की संस्थागत सफलता का सर्वाधिक प्रत्यक्ष प्रमाण 1891 ई. की मारवाड़ जनगणना पर आधारित *Castes of Marwar* में मिलता है। इस ग्रन्थ में कतिपय जातियों को छोड़कर मारवाड़ की समस्त हिन्दू, मुस्लिम, जैन, दलित एवं आदिवासी जातियाँ (दर्ज़ी, मोची, भिश्ती एवं कसाई से लेकर मुस्लिम लोहार एवं सिन्धी मुस्लिम तक) 'मूलतः राजपूत', 'धर्मान्तरित राजपूत' अथवा 'राजपूत कुलों के सम्मिश्रण' के रूप में अपनी उत्पत्ति राजपूत जाति से प्रतिपादित करती हैं।[55] इन जातियों के व्यवसाय एवं सामाजिक स्थितियाँ परस्पर भिन्न हैं, किन्तु वंशावली-दावे की संरचना सर्वत्र एकसमान थी: एक राजपूत पूर्वज, एक 'पतन'-कारण, एवं उस मिलन से एक नई जाति-पहचान।[56]

यह सार्वभौमिकता आकस्मिक नहीं, अपितु उस व्यवस्था का प्रमाण है जिसने वैधता का एकमात्र मार्ग राजपूत-वंश-दावे को स्थिर रखा। जब वैधता की एकमात्र भाषा नख-व्यवस्था की संरचना हो, तो समाज का प्रत्येक स्तर उसी माध्यम से अपनी पहचान निर्मित करने के लिए बाध्य था — यही नख-व्यवस्था की वास्तविक शक्ति है। इन सात प्रकरण-अध्ययनों को एक साथ देखने पर एक समान संरचना दृष्टिगोचर होती है। चाहे दक्षिण-पूरबी पंजाब का मुस्लिम क़ायमख़ानी हो, मालवे का सिख-जाट फुलकियाँ हो, ब्रज का जाट

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[53] Matthew Atmore Sherring, *Hindu Tribes and Castes: As Represented in Benares*, vol. 1 (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Company, 1872), 125.

[54] Prabhakar Shumshere Jung Bahadur Rana, Pashupati Shumshere Jung Bahadur Rana, and Gautam Shumshere Jung Bahadur Rana, *The Ranas of Nepal* (Geneva: Naef, 2002), 110.

[55] Munshi Hardyal Singh, *The Castes of Marwar (Census Report of 1891)* (Jodhpore: Published by Order of the Marwar Darbar, 1894).

[56] यद्यपि यह सूची सम्पूर्ण नहीं है; मारवाड़ एवं वृहत्तर राजस्थान के लिए के॰ एस॰ सिंह सम्पादित *People of India*, राजस्थान, खण्ड 38, भाग 1–2, पंजाब-हरियाणा-दिल्ली-हिमाचल के लिए इब्बेटसन की *Panjab Castes* (लाहौर, 1916), एवं पश्चिमी उत्तर प्रदेश के लिए विलियम क्रुक की *The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh* (कलकत्ता, 1896) द्रष्टव्य हैं।

सिनसिनवार हो, अथवा महाराष्ट्र का कुन्बी भोंसले हो, वैधता की आवश्यकता अनुभव होते ही उन्हें राजस्थान के भाट-बही-तन्त्र की ओर उन्मुख होना अनिवार्य था।

नख-व्यवस्था केवल एक जातीय-वर्गीकरण-प्रणाली नहीं थी, अपितु एक एक ऐसी संस्थागत अवसंरचना थी जो सामाजिक गतिशीलता को एकमात्र स्वीकार्य मार्ग निर्धारित करती थी। राजपूत-वंश-दावे के माध्यम से नियन्त्रित करती थी, एवं जो इस्लाम की सीमाओं का अतिक्रम करके भी कार्यशील थी।

## नख-व्यवस्था का सामाजिक-राजनीतिक प्रभाव

उपरोक्त में विश्लेषित त्रि-सोपानीय वंशावली-विस्तार ने एक ऐसी संरचना निर्मित की थी जिसमें समस्त जातियों की वंशावलियाँ एक ही ब्रह्माण्डशास्त्रीय मूल से आरम्भ होती थीं। रावजी जब बही खोलकर वह ब्रह्माण्डशास्त्रीय आख्यान सुनाते थे, तो वह केवल राजपूतों की वंशावली का उद्घोष नहीं था। वह प्रत्येक उपस्थित व्यक्ति की अपनी वंशावली का प्रारम्भिक अध्याय था, क्योंकि उस परिवार की पतन-कथा के पूर्व तक वह परिवार भी उसी राजपूत वंश-क्रम का अंग था। इस एकसूत्री उद्गम से पाँच परस्पर-सम्बद्ध एवं राजनीतिक दृष्टि से निर्णायक प्रभाव उत्पन्न हुए।

नख-व्यवस्था का प्रथम प्रभाव वंशावली-दावों की परस्पर-निर्भरता में निहित था। जब एक जाट परिवार की बही में यह अभिलिखित था कि उनके पूर्वज भाटी राजपूत वंश से उत्पन्न हुए, एवं वह भाटी वंश कृष्ण के पुत्र प्रद्युम्न से उत्पन्न यदुवंशी था, तो इस आख्यान को असत्य घोषित करने के लिए कौन-सा तर्क सम्भव था? यदि कोई यह कहे कि राजपूत कृष्ण के वंशज नहीं हैं, तो जाट परिवार की अपनी वंशावली भी उसी क्षण कल्पित होती। क्योंकि, उनकी वंशावली उसी भाटी वंश-वृक्ष की शाखा थी। राजपूत वंशावली को स्वीकार करना एवं अपनी वंशावली को स्वीकार करना एक ही कार्य था। प्रत्येक राजपूतेतर परिवार उस वंशावली-क्रम का स्वैच्छिक रक्षक बनता था जो उसे अधीनस्थ करती थी।

द्वितीय प्रभाव राजपूत राजनीतिक प्राधान्य की ब्रह्माण्डशास्त्रीय वैधता थी। यदि राजपूत राजनीतिक सत्ता केवल सेना एवं शस्त्र पर आधारित होती, तो उसे चुनौती देना एक शुद्ध राजनीतिक कार्य होता। किन्तु नख-व्यवस्था ने यह स्थापित किया कि राम एवं कृष्ण के वंशज होने के कारण राजपूत धर्म के स्वाभाविक संरक्षक थे। जिन्होंने 'मुस्लिम-काल की अव्यवस्था' में राजपूत-धर्म का त्याग किया, वे उस अधिकार से स्वयं च्युत हुए। भूमि-स्वामित्व एवं राजनीतिक नेतृत्व उस नैतिक इतिहास की स्वाभाविक परिणतियाँ थीं जो भाट-बही में अंकित थीं।

तृतीय प्रभाव मनोवैज्ञानिक था। नख-व्यवस्था ने प्रत्येक राजपूतेतर समुदाय के सदस्य की आत्म-धारणा में एक स्थायी हीनता का बोध निर्मित किया। जब किसी व्यक्ति की सामाजिक पहचान इस तथ्य पर आधारित थी कि उसके पूर्वज ने राजपूत-धर्म का त्याग किया एवं इस कारण 'पतित' हुआ, तो राजपूत के समक्ष खड़े होने का नैतिक आधार कहाँ था? एक प्रतिद्वन्द्वी के विरुद्ध उठना राजनीतिक कार्य है, एक ज्येष्ठ के विरुद्ध उठना पारिवारिक पाप है। जिस परिवार ने पहले ही 'पतन' का पाप किया हो, उसके लिए अतिरिक्त नैतिक उल्लंघन का सामाजिक व्यय असाधारण रूप से अधिक है।

चतुर्थ प्रभाव यह था कि नख-व्यवस्था केवल अधीनस्थों को अधीन रखने का उपकरण नहीं थी, अपितु उभरते शक्तिशाली कुटुम्बों को समाहित करके राजपूत वंशावली-प्राधान्य को अखण्डित बनाए रखने का तन्त्र भी थी। जब भी कोई नया कुटुम्ब राजनीतिक, सैन्य अथवा भू-स्वामित्व के माध्यम से शक्ति-सम्पन्न होने लगता था, तो वैधता का एकमात्र उपलब्ध साधन राजपूत-वंशावली थी। वह भाट के संस्थागत एकाधिकार में था। किन्तु इस समावेश में एक निर्णायक असमानता अन्तर्निहित थी। उभरते कुटुम्बों को राजपूत जाति में समान सदस्य के रूप में नहीं, अपितु पतित राजपूत के रूप में स्थापित किया जाता था। वंश-सम्बन्ध स्वीकृत किया जाता था, किन्तु श्रेष्ठता नहीं दी जाती थी। फुलकियाँ, सिनसिनवार एवं भोंसले, तीनों इस प्रक्रिया के प्रत्यक्ष उदाहरण हैं।

पञ्चम एवं सर्वाधिक परिष्कृत प्रभाव 'स्तरीकृत लचीलेपन' की संरचना थी। पतन एवं प्रत्यावर्तन, दोनों के लिए एक ही द्वार था। 'संस्कृतीकरण' का तर्क यह है कि निम्न जातियाँ उच्च जातियों की रीतियाँ अपनाने की आकांक्षा रखती हैं। किन्तु नख-व्यवस्था ने इस आकांक्षा को स्मृति में परिणत किया। एक जाट किसान राजपूत बनना नहीं चाहता था। वह मानता था कि उसके पूर्वज पहले से ही राजपूत थे, एवं उनकी भूल ने उसे उस स्थिति से वंचित किया। जब कोई 'पतित' कुटुम्ब पुनः शासक, सैनिक अथवा भूस्वामी बनता था, तो भाट की बही का वृत्तान्त परिवर्तित होता था। पर्याप्त पीढ़ियों के सार्वजनिक पाठ के पश्चात् वह नवीन वृत्तान्त सामाजिक यथार्थ बनता था। जड़ेचा का प्रकरण इस प्रक्रिया का सर्वाधिक सुप्रमाणित उदाहरण है। समा मुस्लिम शासकों से उत्पन्न जड़ेचा, पुनः हिन्दू होने पर, यदुवंशी भाटी राजपूत क्रम में स्थापित हुए। उन्हें 'प्रवेश' नहीं दिया गया, अपितु 'पुनरागमन' हुआ, क्योंकि वे कभी बाहर थे ही नहीं, केवल विचलित हुए थे।[57] किन्तु

[57] समाजशास्त्री लैला मेहता के अनुसार जड़ेचा मूलतः सिन्ध के सम्मा पशुपालक समुदाय से उत्पन्न थे — और सोढ़ा राजपूत स्त्रियों से विवाह के माध्यम से राजपूत पहचान प्राप्त की। राजनीतिक शक्ति प्राप्त होते ही उन्होंने कृष्ण से प्रत्यक्ष यदुवंशी वंश-सम्बन्ध का दावा किया। इस दावे का अभिलेखन गुजरात में वाहीवञ्चा बारोटों द्वारा किया गया — जो राजस्थान के भाट की संस्थागत समानान्तर थे। ए.एम. शाह एवं आर.जी. श्रॉफ के 1958 के अध्ययन के अनुसार वाहीवञ्चा बारोट अपने संरक्षकों की वंशावलियों को कृष्ण एवं यदुवंश से जोड़कर उनकी सामाजिक प्रतिष्ठा उन्नत करते थे — और यह सेवा विशेषतः राजपूत-पद की आकांक्षा रखने वाले समुदायों के लिए थी। जड़ेचा प्रकरण इस शोधपत्र के दो केन्द्रीय तर्कों को एक साथ पुष्ट करता है: प्रथम, कि संयोजक-पुरुष की यान्त्रिकी राजस्थान तक सीमित नहीं थी — वह एक अखिल-उत्तर-पश्चिम भारतीय संस्थागत प्रवृत्ति थी; द्वितीय, कि जहाँ-जहाँ राजनीतिक शक्ति का उदय हुआ, वहाँ-वहाँ भाट-परम्परा की किसी न किसी स्थानीय संस्था ने वंश-दावे को

यह प्रत्यावर्तन शक्ति एवं समय दोनों पर निर्भर था। शक्तिशाली के लिए द्वार सदैव उन्मुक्त था। शक्तिहीन के लिए 'पतित' की पहचान स्थायी रहती थी। इस स्तरीकृत लचीलेपन ने व्यवस्था को दो कार्य करने में समर्थ किया: शक्तिशाली को समाहित करके स्वयं को सुदृढ़ करना, एवं शक्तिहीन को स्थायितः अधीनस्थ रखना।

## उपसंहार: राजपूत एवं 'पतित राजपूत'

इस शोधपत्र के आरम्भ में जो दृश्य प्रस्तुत किया गया था — रावजी का बही खोलना, गणेश-वन्दना, वह ब्रह्माण्डशास्त्रीय आख्यान, एकत्र परिवार की श्रद्धा — उसे अब एक भिन्न दृष्टि से देखना सम्भव है। परिवार का ध्यान ब्रह्माण्डशास्त्रीय प्रस्तावना पर नहीं जाता। वह तब केन्द्रित होता है जब संयोजक पूर्वज की पतन-कथा आती है, जब परिचित नाम कर्णगोचर होते हैं। किन्तु राजनीतिक कार्य वहाँ नहीं होता। वह उस प्रस्तावना में होता है जिसे कोई सुनता नहीं, जो इतनी बार पुनरावृत्त हुई है कि अब प्रश्नातीत है।

उस प्रस्तावना ने शताब्दियों में एक जटिल वैधता-संरचना का निर्माण किया जो तीन सोपानों में विकसित हुई। प्रथम सोपान में ब्रह्म-क्षत्रिय दावे थे — परशुराम-संहार के पश्चात् ब्राह्मण पिता एवं क्षत्रिय माता से उत्पन्न शासक-वर्ग।[58] इस सोपान में शासन का अधिकार ब्राह्मणीय अनुज्ञा से था, स्वतन्त्र दैवी विधान से नहीं।

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अभिलिखित करने का कार्य सम्पन्न किया। See A. M. Shah and R. G. Shroff, "The Vahīvancā Bāroṭs of Gujarat: A Caste of Genealogists and Mythographers," *Journal of American Folklore* 71 (1958): 246–76.

[58] विष्णु के छठें अवतार परशुराम की कथा ब्राह्मणवादी परम्परा की उन केन्द्रीय ब्रह्माण्डशास्त्रीय घटनाओं में से एक है जिसने वर्ण-व्यवस्था के मूल स्वरूप को स्थायी एवं निर्णायक रूप से पुनर्संरचित किया। महाभारत के आदि पर्व के अष्टपञ्चाशत्तम अध्याय (श्लोक 3–8) के अनुसार मूल क्षत्रिय वर्ण प्रजापति ब्रह्मा के विराट् पुरुष की भुजाओं से उत्पन्न हुआ था और उसे शासन एवं रक्षा का स्वयंसिद्ध अधिकार प्राप्त था। जब सहस्रबाहु अर्जुन के पुत्रों ने भृगुवंशी ऋषि जमदग्नि की निहत्थे अवस्था में हत्या कर दी, तब उनके पुत्र परशुराम ने यह शपथ ली कि वे पृथ्वी से क्षत्रिय-वर्ग का समूल उन्मूलन करेंगे। यह व्यक्तिगत प्रतिशोध नहीं, एक ब्रह्माण्डशास्त्रीय उद्घोषणा थी कि जो वर्ण ब्रह्मा की भुजाओं से उत्पन्न होकर भी अपने धर्म से विचलित हो गया, वह अपने अस्तित्व का अधिकारी नहीं रहा। परशुराम धर्मयुद्ध की मर्यादाओं के कठोर पालनकर्ता थे; अतः स्त्रियों, अवयस्कों और गर्भस्थ शिशुओं का वध उन्होंने नहीं किया। इसी कारण एक अभियान पर्याप्त नहीं था। प्रत्येक अभियान में वयस्क क्षत्रिय पुरुष मारे गए, किन्तु गर्भस्थ एवं अवयस्क बालक जीवित रहे; वे बड़े हुए और अगले अभियान में मारे गए। यह क्रम इक्कीस बार दोहराया गया। इक्कीसवें अभियान तक न कोई क्षत्रिय स्त्री गर्भवती रही और न कोई अवयस्क बालक जीवित बचा। इस प्रकार पृथ्वी पर क्षत्रिय पुरुष-वंश का पूर्ण उन्मूलन सम्पन्न हुआ। इन अभियानों में प्रवाहित रक्त से परशुराम ने कुरुक्षेत्र के समन्तपञ्चक क्षेत्र में पाँच कुण्ड भरे और अपने पितरों को रक्त-तर्पण अर्पित किया। तदनन्तर परशुराम महेन्द्र पर्वत पर तपस्या के लिए गए जहाँ दृढ़-व्रती तपस्वी ब्राह्मण भी थे। क्षत्रिय विधवाएँ एवं कन्याएँ उनके पास पहुँचीं और वंश-परम्परा की पुनर्स्थापना की प्रार्थना की। परशुराम की अनुमति से उन तपस्वी ब्राह्मणों ने नियोग-प्रथा के अनुसार, केवल ऋतुकाल में और धर्म की मर्यादा में रहकर, उन स्त्रियों से सन्तान उत्पन्न की। इस प्रकार उदित नवीन क्षत्रिय वर्ग ब्रह्म-क्षत्रिय कहलाया। *महाभारत* घोषित करता है कि इस प्रकार चारों वर्ण पुनः पूर्ण हुए: *चत्वारोऽपि तदा वर्णा बभूवुर्ब्राह्मणोत्तराः। ब्राह्मणोत्तराः* पद इस सम्पूर्ण आख्यान का केन्द्रीय ब्रह्माण्डशास्त्रीय निष्कर्ष है। मूल क्षत्रियों को शासन का अधिकार स्वभावतः प्राप्त था; वह ब्रह्मा की भुजाओं से पितृवंश-परम्परा में अन्तर्निहित और स्वयंसिद्ध था।

अग्निकुल-मिथक ने केवल चार वंशों को नियोग की लज्जा से मुक्त किया, किन्तु वसिष्ठ ऋषि की अनुष्ठान-शक्ति केन्द्र में बनी रही। निर्णायक संक्रमण भक्तिकाल में घटित हुआ। भाट-वंशावलियों ने राजवंशों को राम एवं कृष्ण के जैविक वंशज घोषित किया। इस तृतीय सोपान में ब्राह्मणीय मध्यस्थता की आवश्यकता ही समाप्त हुई। यदि राम स्वयं पूर्वज हैं, तो किस ब्राह्मण की अनुज्ञा चाहिए? किन्तु इस सम्पूर्ण विकास का सर्वाधिक उद्घाटनकारी पक्ष यह है कि ये तीनों दावे परस्पर-विरोधी होने पर भी सहअस्तित्व में थे, क्योंकि उनका मानक ऐतिहासिक सत्य नहीं था। वे विभिन्न श्रोताओं एवं राजनीतिक सन्दर्भों में वैधता-उत्पादन के उपकरण थे।[59]

मालिनोफ़्स्की का 'प्रयोजनात्मक अधिकार-पत्र' यहाँ अपर्याप्त सिद्ध होता है। उनका तर्क था कि मिथक पूर्व-विद्यमान सामाजिक आवश्यकताओं की पूर्ति करते हैं। किन्तु नख-व्यवस्था ने वह आवश्यकता पूर्व-विद्यमान नहीं पाई। उसने वह आवश्यकता स्वयं निर्मित करके उसे सनातन अनुभव कराया। इस निर्माण का एक सूक्ष्म किन्तु प्रकाशमान उदाहरण वह भेंट की अतिरञ्जित प्रविष्टि है जिसकी चर्चा प्रस्तावना में की गई थी: पितरों की स्मृति का पवित्र अभिलेख एवं आर्थिक दबाव-तन्त्र एक ही पृष्ठ पर। इस व्यवस्था का सर्वाधिक विलक्षण पक्ष यह है कि इसका कोई एक विशेष अभिकर्ता नहीं था। भाट को ग्राहक चाहिए थे, समुदायों को प्रतिष्ठा चाहिए थी, उभरते कुटुम्ब को वैधता चाहिए थी, राजपूत शासक को ब्रह्माण्डशास्त्रीय आधार चाहिए था। इन अभिसारी स्वार्थों ने मिलकर एक ऐसी संरचना निर्मित की जिसे किसी ने नियन्त्रित नहीं किया। इसीलिए, कोई उसे विखण्डित नहीं कर सका।

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ब्रह्म-क्षत्रियों का अधिकार इसके विपरीत प्रदत्त था; वह ब्राह्मण जनकों से प्राप्त हुआ और परशुराम की सत्ता द्वारा अनुमोदित था। जो प्रदत्त है वह सशर्त है और दाता की इच्छा पर व्यपगत हो सकता है। पुराणीय परम्परा, विशेषतः मत्स्य, विष्णु एवं भागवत पुराण, तथा सोलहवीं शताब्दी के निबन्धकार राघवानन्द भट्टाचार्य इस व्यवस्था की पुष्टि करते हैं; उनके अनुसार कलियुग में क्षत्रिय एवं वैश्य वर्णों का अस्तित्व ही नहीं है, अर्थात् ब्रह्म-क्षत्रियों की प्रदत्त व्यवस्था व्यपगत हो चुकी है और केवल ब्राह्मण तथा शूद्र ये दो ही वर्ण शेष हैं। इस ब्रह्माण्डशास्त्रीय प्रतिमान की विधिक प्रतिध्वनि सन् 1840 ई. में कलकत्ता की *सदर दीवानी अदालत* के उस निर्णय में परिलक्षित होती है जिसमें न्यायालय के ब्राह्मण पण्डितों ने राजपूतों को शूद्र जाति के रूप में अभिहित किया। देखें: *Decisions of the Sudder Dewanny Adawlut, Recorded in English, in Conformity to Act XII. 1843, in 1846* (Calcutta: W. Ridsdale, Military Orphan Press, 1847), 340, Ext. No. 27: copy of a proceeding before Mr. J. F. M. Reid, 7 November 1840, in Oodaiepertaub Sein *vs.* Ranee Amer Raj Luchmee Deybee and others, with *vyavastha* of the pundit of the Court, "setting forth that rajpoots are of the sooder caste"; accessed via Hathi Trust Digital Library, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.35112102377498.

[59] नैणसी ने मेवाड़ राजवंश को एक ही ग्रन्थ में दो परस्पर-विरोधी वंशावलियाँ दीं: एक ब्राह्मण पितृ-वंश की, दूसरी सूर्यवंशी क्षत्रिय की। यह सह-अस्तित्व इस तथ्य का प्रमाण है कि वंशावली-दावों का मानक तार्किक संगति नहीं, राजनीतिक उपयोगिता था। यद्यपि अधिक सम्भावना तो इस बात की है कि राजपूतीकरण के पश्चात् भी मेवाड़ के गहलोत-सिसोदिया राजवंश ने अपना 'ब्रह्म-क्षत्रिय' दावा धारण किया, क्योंकि तार्किक दृष्टि से परशुराम संहार के पश्चात् कोई भी क्षत्रिय शुद्ध क्षत्रिय हो ही नहीं सकता; वे ब्राह्मण पुरुषों एवं क्षत्रिय महिलाओं के नियोग जन्में। देखे: मुंहता नैणसी, *नैणसी री ख्यात*, भाग 3, सम्पा. बदरीप्रसाद साकरिया (जोधपुर: राजस्थान प्राच्यविद्या प्रतिष्ठान, 1964), पृ. 9–10.

किन्तु इस समूची व्यवस्था की सर्वाधिक मौलिक राजनीतिक उपलब्धि यह नहीं थी कि उसने किन समुदायों को 'पतित' घोषित किया। वह यह थी कि उसने 'पतन' की अवधारणा को 'राजपूतीकरण' की प्रक्रिया की संरचनागत अनिवार्यता के रूप में निर्मित किया। 'पतित राजपूत' की श्रेणी के बिना 'राजपूत' की श्रेणी का अस्तित्व ही सम्भव नहीं था। इसे समझने के लिए ऐतिहासिक क्रम की वास्तविक दिशा पर ध्यान देना आवश्यक है। डिर्क कोल्फ़, तनुजा कोठियाल एवं बी.डी. चट्टोपाध्याय, तीनों ने स्वतन्त्र रूप से यह स्थापित किया है कि वास्तविक ऐतिहासिक क्रम यह था: जो कुल राजनीतिक-सैन्य शक्ति प्राप्त करता था, भाट उसे राजपूत वंश-वृक्ष में स्थापित करता था। कोठियाल की यह टिप्पणी विशेष रूप से उल्लेखनीय है कि सोलहवीं शताब्दी से पूर्व 'राजपूत' एक बन्द अन्तर्विवाही जाति नहीं, अपितु 'सभी प्रकार के साहसिकों के लिए एक उन्मुक्त छत्र-श्रेणी' थी। भील, मेर, मीना, गुज्जर, जाट, राईका जैसे समुदायों से 'राजपूत' निर्मित हुआ, न कि 'राजपूत' से वे निर्मित हुए।[60] नख-व्यवस्था ने ठीक यही दिशा उलटी: 'राजपूत था →पतित होकर अमुक बना।'[61] यदि वास्तविक क्रम स्वीकार किया जाता, तो राम एवं कृष्ण से जैविक वंश-सम्बन्ध का ब्रह्माण्डशास्त्रीय आधार, एवं उस पर आश्रित समस्त पदानुक्रम, क्षण-भर में विघटित होता। 'पतित' की अवधारणा इसीलिए अनिवार्य थी। उसने वह मिथ्या दिशा सामाजिक स्मृति में गहनतः प्रत्यारोपित की कि स्वयं वे समुदाय भी, जो राजपूत-श्रेणी के निर्माता थे, अपने आपको उसके 'पतित वंशज' मानने को विवश हुए।

यह ध्यातव्य है कि नख-व्यवस्था का आरोपण उन समुदायों पर भी हुआ जिनकी आन्तरिक सामाजिक संरचना में इसे न कार्यात्मक स्थान मिल सका और न सामान्य स्वीकृति। वस्तुतः भाट-बही में अभिलेखित नख उनके लिए एक सुप्त दावे के समान था: अप्रासंगिक, जब तक राजनीतिक आवश्यकता उसे जागृत न कर दे।[62]

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[60] Tanuja Kothiyal, *Nomadic Narratives: A History of Mobility and Identity in the Great Indian Desert* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 265.

[61] चूँकि जनसंख्या-आनुवंशिक साक्ष्यों ने जातियों के उद्गम के पुराने अनुमानों को पुनर्संरचित कर दिया है, इसीलिए राजपूत जाति के उद्गम को पुनः समझना आवश्यक है। उदाहरणस्वरूप विंसेन्ट स्मिथ ने गुज्जर जाति को हूण मूल का माना, जबकि आज यह बात असंगत सिद्ध है; गुज्जर एक IVC-Periphery मूल की जाति है, जो उन्हें उन्हीं मूल IVC जनसंख्याओं से जोड़ती है जिनके वंशज कालान्तर में प्रायद्वीप में बस गए। इसी प्रकार टॉड से लेकर इब्बेटसन तक ने राजपूत एवं जाट को 'शक-मूल' की एक ही जाति माना, जो अब असत्य सिद्ध हुई है; देखें: Ajai K. Pathak et al., "The Genetic Ancestry of Modern Indus Valley Populations from Northwest India," *American Journal of Human Genetics* 103, no. 6 (2018): 918–29, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajhg.2018.10.022.

[62] उदाहरणस्वरूप पंजाब के अन्तिम प्रीमियर मलिक खिज़र हयात ख़ाँ का टिवाना कुटुम्ब मूलवंश की दृष्टि से जाट है, किन्तु नख की दृष्टि से पवार राजपूत अभिलेखित होने के कारण परवर्ती दशकों में राजपूत माना जाने लगा (Ian Talbot, *Khizr Tiwana: The Punjab Unionist Party and the Partition of India* [Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2002], 13–17). इससे भी अधिक उल्लेखनीय यह है कि यह व्यवस्था राजनीतिक महत्त्वाकांक्षा से सर्वथा निरपेक्ष व्यक्तित्वों को भी अपनी परिधि में समाहित कर लेती है: भौतिकी के नोबेल-पुरस्कार-विजेता अब्द अस-सलाम पितृपक्ष से झंग के जाट थे, किन्तु चूँकि भाट-बही में उनके गोत्र का उद्गम जैसलमेर के भाटी राजवंश से अभिलेखित था, अतः उनके पुत्र ने उन्हें 'राजपूत अनुशासन

इसका सर्वाधिक स्पष्ट उदाहरण जाट समुदाय है। इसलिए नहीं कि इस पर यह व्यवस्था विशेष रूप से आरोपित हुई, अपितु इसलिए कि उसकी तीन स्वतन्त्र विशेषताएँ इस आरोपण की मनमानी प्रकृति को असन्दिग्ध रूप से उद्घाटित करती हैं। प्रथम, इसकी सामाजिक संरचना का आधार गोत्र है, न कि भाट-निर्धारित नख। द्वितीय, जनसंख्या-आनुवंशिकी के अनुसार इसकी आनुवंशिक संरचना उत्तर-पश्चिम भारत के अन्य समुदायों से पृथक् है। तृतीय, इसके बहुसंख्यक सदस्य इस तथ्य से ही अनभिज्ञ हैं कि उनकी बही में कोई नख अभिलेखित भी है।

इस शोधपत्र का विशिष्ट योगदान उस तन्त्र का उद्घाटन है: संयोजक पूर्वज की वह यान्त्रिकी जिसने बन्द तार्किक वृत्त निर्मित किया, एवं वह पाँच-कड़ियों वाली वृत्ताकार प्रमाण-शृंखला जिसका कोई स्वतन्त्र बाह्य आधार नहीं था। किन्तु इससे भी आगे, यह इस शोधपत्र का केन्द्रीय व्युत्क्रम तर्क है। 'राजपूत' एवं 'पतित राजपूत' दोनों एक ही संस्था के सह-उत्पाद हैं, उसके आरम्भ-बिन्दु नहीं। जब राम पाण्डे ने पूछा 'क्या सिनसिनवार वास्तव में जदौन हैं', तो यह प्रश्न उसी तन्त्र के भीतर से उठाया गया था जिसका इस शोधपत्र ने उद्घाटन किया। यह स्वीकृत किया गया कि एक 'प्रामाणिक राजपूत' श्रेणी पूर्व-विद्यमान है जिसके मानदण्ड

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वाला' बताया (Ahmad Salam, "Professor Abdus Salam – KBE FRS," *Al-Hakam Magazine*, 4 July 2018, https://www.alhakam.org/professor-abdus-salam-kbe-frs/) — जबकि नख-परम्परा से सर्वथा अनभिज्ञ उनके ममेरे भाई एवं सुप्रसिद्ध इतिहासकार के॰ के॰ अज़ीज़ ने उन्हें जाट निरूपित किया (K. K. Aziz, *The Coffee House of Lahore: A Memoir 1942–57* [Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2013], 201). नख-व्यवस्था की सर्वाधिक आश्चर्यकारी विशेषता यह है कि इसने केवल सामाजिक-राजनीतिक व्यक्तित्वों को ही नहीं, अपितु लोक-देवताओं को भी अपनी परिधि में आबद्ध किया — सम्भवतः इसलिए कि राजत्व एवं देवत्व दोनों राजपूत जाति तक सीमित रहें। बिश्नोई पन्थ के संस्थापक जाम्भाजी ने अपने दोहों में केवल जाटों को ही सम्बोधित किया था (किशोरसिंह वार्हस्पत्य, *श्री करणी चरित्र* [जोधपुर श्री करणी साहित्य संस्थान, 1979], 104), तथापि बीसवीं शताब्दी के आरम्भ से उन्हें राजपूत घोषित किया जाने लगा, क्योंकि भाट-बही में उनके गोत्र का उद्गम राजा विक्रमादित्य परमार से अभिलेखित है; इस प्रक्रिया में उनसे सम्बद्ध समस्त पारिवारिक वृत्त भी राजपूत हो गया। उनकी माता हँसादे, जो खिलेरी गोत्र से थीं, राजपूत मानी गईं, क्योंकि खिलेरी गोत्र का उद्गम भाटी राजवंश से अभिलेखित था; उनकी बुआ के पति महिपालजी, जो इसरोल गोत्र से थे, चौहान-राजपूत घोषित हुए, क्योंकि इसरोल गोत्र का उद्गम चौहान-वंश से अभिलेखित था। इसी क्रम में, मारवाड़ के सवालख क्षेत्र के लोक-देवता तेजाजी — जो धौलिया गोत्र के जाट थे — भी राजपूत घोषित किये गए, क्योंकि भाट-बही में धौलिया गोत्र की उत्पत्ति खींची-चौहानों से अभिलेखित थी ("वंशावली व दंत कथाओं में तेजाजी के जन्म वर्ष में 113 साल का अंतर," *दैनिक भास्कर*, कुचामन संस्करण, 19 फ़रवरी 2019, 4; ऑनलाइन: https://www.bhaskar.com/rajasthan/jalore/news/rajasthan-news-first-read-genealogy-on-the-birth-anniversary-of-tejaji-maharaj-044025-3931948.html). रॉबर्ट स्टर्न एवं एरिक स्टोक्स के अध्ययन यह प्रदर्शित करते हैं कि जाट लम्बे समय से राजपूतों के प्रतिस्पर्धी रहे हैं — न केवल ब्रज अथवा पंजाब में, बल्कि राजस्थान में भी, जहाँ वे बीकानेर रियासत की स्थापना तक छोटे भोमिचार थे (Robert W. Stern, *The Cat and the Lion: Jaipur State in the British Raj* [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988], 287; Eric Stokes, *The Peasant and the Raj: Studies in Agrarian Society and Peasant Rebellion in Colonial India* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978], 17, 87). अतः जिस समुदाय की राजपूतों से ऐतिहासिक प्रतिस्पर्धा रही थी, उसके लिए राजपूत-मूल का अभिलेख गर्व का नहीं, सामाजिक अधीनता की स्वीकृति का प्रतीक था।

पर अन्य दावों को परखा जाए। किन्तु वह 'प्रामाणिक' श्रेणी स्वयं उसी वंशावली-तन्त्र की निर्मिति है। राजपूतीकरण पर कोई भी चर्चा तब तक अपूर्ण रहेगी जब तक यह स्वीकार न किया जाए कि 'राजपूत' नामक श्रेणी इसी समावेश-बहिष्कार की प्रक्रिया से निरन्तर निर्मित होती रही; प्रक्रिया का परिणाम, उसका आधार नहीं।

यह व्यवस्था इतिहास नहीं, वर्तमान है। जब आज समुदाय अपनी जाति-पहचान के दावों के लिए बही-अभिलेखों को प्रस्तुत करते हैं, जब औपनिवेशिक जनगणना के अभिलेख सामाजिक न्याय के तर्कों का आधार बनते हैं, तब वही वृत्ताकार प्रमाण-शृंखला पुनः कार्यशील होती है। यहाँ एक स्वयं-आलोचनात्मक स्वीकृति अनिवार्य है: यह शोधपत्र उन्हीं स्रोतों — नैणसी, भाट-बहियाँ, ख्यात — के माध्यम से लिखा गया है जिनकी यह आलोचना करता है। आलोचक उस परम्परा की भाषा में बोलता है जिसका वह विश्लेषण कर रहा है। यह तनाव इस विश्लेषण की सीमा नहीं, इसकी सत्यनिष्ठा है। रावजी अभी भी गाँव में आते हैं। लाल वस्त्र में बँधी पोथी खोलते हैं, गणेश-वन्दना करते हैं। परिवार एकत्र होता है; वृद्धजन पहले घेरे में, युवा पीछे। श्रद्धापूर्वक पाठ होता है, पितरों की स्मृति में। कोई इसे राजनीति नहीं मानता। और यही, ठीक यही, इस व्यवस्था की सात शताब्दियों की सफलता का मर्म है।

अन्त में, इस शोधपत्र में, भाट-बही परम्परा के एक भाग के रूप में, नख-व्यवस्था को एक राजनीतिक उपकरण के रूप में स्थापित किया गया है। किन्तु एक महत्त्वपूर्ण प्रश्न यह है कि यह भाट-बही अन्य समुदायों तक किस कालावधि में प्रसारित हुई। यह परिकल्पनीय है कि अन्य समुदायों में बही-तन्त्र का व्यापक विस्तार मुग़ल केन्द्रीय सत्ता के पतन के पश्चात्, अर्थात् अठारहवीं शताब्दी में हुआ, जो क्षेत्रीय शासकों की उभरती वैधता-आवश्यकताओं के कालखण्ड के साथ संगत है। इस दावे की परीक्षा के लिए किसी एक कुल की बही में पीढ़ी-दर-पीढ़ी नाम-वितरण का विश्लेषण आवश्यक होगा, जिसके अन्तर्गत यह परीक्षण किया जाएगा कि बही में आदि-काल एवं अर्वाचीन काल के मध्य संरचनात्मक रिक्तता उपस्थित है या नहीं, एवं प्राचीन खण्ड में समस्त पीढ़ियाँ अविच्छिन्न एकल पिता-पुत्र क्रम में हैं या नहीं। डेविड हेनिगे ने अफ़्रीकी एवं भारतीय राजवंश-सूचियों के तुलनात्मक अध्ययन में यह प्रदर्शित किया था कि मौखिक वंशावलियों में आदि-काल एवं निकट अतीत की स्मृतियों के मध्य एक 'चलायमान रिक्तता' होती है जिसे परवर्ती लेखन एक पूर्व-निर्धारित प्रारूप में भरता है। वंशावली की पौराणिक उत्पत्ति से संयोजक-पूर्वज तक के खण्ड का निर्माण ठीक इसी प्रकार होता है।[63] तथापि इसकी पुष्टि भावी अनुसन्धान का विषय है।

इसी मध्य, मानव-समाजों में यह एक सार्वभौमिक प्रवृत्ति है कि वे अपनी उत्पत्ति किसी राजा अथवा राजवंश से होने का दावा करें, चाहे वह राजा अथवा राजवंश ऐतिहासिक हो अथवा पौराणिक। भाट-तन्त्र ने इस

[63] David P. Henige, "Oral Tradition and Chronology," *Journal of African History* 12, no. 3 (1971): 371–389; idem, *The Chronology of Oral Tradition: Quest for a Chimera* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974).

सार्वभौमिक आकांक्षा को एक विशिष्ट संस्थागत रूप प्रदान किया। उत्तर-पश्चिम भारत में मुस्लिम काल के आरम्भ तक जनमानस में विद्यमान समस्त प्राचीन राजाओं एवं राजवंशों को राजपूत-वंश-वृक्ष के अन्तर्गत समाहित कर लिया गया। ब्राह्मणों, विदेशी मूल के मुस्लिम समुदायों अथवा विदेशी मूल का अभिकथन करने वाले मुस्लिम समुदायों के अतिरिक्त शेष समस्त समुदायों को उसी वंश-वृक्ष की शाखा अथवा पतित शाखा घोषित किया गया। यहाँ तक कि तुर्क एवं मुग़ल शासकों को भी भाट-तन्त्र ने भाटी राजपूत वंश से सम्बद्ध करने का प्रयास किया, जिससे वे राजपूत ब्रह्माण्डशास्त्रीय ढाँचे से सर्वथा बाहर न रहें। इस संरचना एवं इब्राहीमी परम्पराओं के वंशावली-विभाजन में एक सादृश्य दृष्टिगोचर होता है। यहूदी परम्परा ने इसहाक़ के वंशजों (यहूदियों) को, जो इब्राहीम एवं उनकी वैध पत्नी सारा से जन्मे थे, वैध उत्तराधिकारी घोषित किया; जबकि इस्माईल के वंशजों (अरबों) को, जो हाजरा से जन्मे थे, जो सारा की दासी थीं, अवैध। इस प्रकार एक ही पितृ-स्रोत से दो भिन्न वैधता-श्रेणियाँ निर्मित हुईं। भाट-तन्त्र ने ठीक इसी संरचना को भारतीय सन्दर्भ में संचालित किया: राजपूत 'वैध' क्षत्रिय थे, शेष समुदाय 'पतित'। किन्तु दोनों एक ही वंश-वृक्ष की शाखाएँ थीं, और यही वंश-वृक्ष समस्त सामाजिक वैधता का एकमात्र स्रोत था।

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# The 1918 Spetch Correspondence as Founding Document of British Columbia's Open Learning Tradition

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*This article examines the 1918 correspondence between Samuel W. Spetch and British Columbia government officials as founding documents of provincial correspondence education. Drawing on archival theory by Ann Laura Stoler and Michel-Rolph Trouillot, alongside settler-colonial theory by Patrick Wolfe and Lorenzo Veracini, I read these letters both along and against the archival grain, attending to what they reveal about early-twentieth-century educational assumptions and what they systematically exclude. I situate British Columbia's innovation within international developments in distance education, tracing connections to Australian correspondence schools and broader movements in adult education. Through scholarly personal narrative methodology following Robert Nash, I blend my perspective as a twenty-five-year practitioner within British Columbia's open learning system throughout this analysis, offering concrete examples of how embodied professional knowledge shapes archival interpretation. The genealogical inquiry traces institutional evolution from the 1919 Elementary Correspondence School through the Open Learning Institute (1978) and Open Learning Agency (1988) to contemporary successors, including Thompson Rivers University and BC campus. A substantial examination of archival silences engages with Indigenous education historiography by J. R. Miller and John Milloy, feminist scholarship on women's educational labour by Alison Prentice, and childhood history methodology by Neil Sutherland. I argue that responsible engagement with founding documents requires theorising correspondence education within settler colonial structures that simultaneously extended educational opportunity to settler families while subjecting Indigenous peoples to the violence of residential schooling. This article contributes to the history of distance education, British Columbia educational history, settler-colonial studies, and methodological conversations about archival research in educational scholarship.*

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**Keywords:** Correspondence education, Archival theory, Settler colonialism, British Columbia, Scholarly personal narrative, Indigenous education, Distance learning history.

## Introduction: A Letter Arrives

I first encountered Samuel Spetch's name in a staff meeting, mentioned in passing during a presentation on Thompson Rivers University Open

Learning's institutional history. The presenter noted that our open learning tradition stretched back over a century, to a farmer who had written to the premier requesting education for his isolated children. I remember feeling a flicker of curiosity, then letting it fade as the meeting moved on to budget projections and enrollment targets. It would be years before I returned to that moment, before I understood that Spetch's letter was a thread I could pull to unravel something much larger about the institution I had served for a quarter century, and about the colonial structures that shaped educational provision in British Columbia.

On 30 December 1918, Samuel W. Spetch sat down to write a letter that would transform educational provision in British Columbia.[1] Addressing Premier John Oliver, Spetch requested something unprecedented in Canada: government-provided correspondence education for elementary-aged children living in isolated circumstances. His three children, growing up far from any established school in the province's remote coastal regions, had no practical means of attending regular classes. The nearest school lay beyond a reasonable travel distance, and the family's circumstances prevented relocation. Spetch proposed that the provincial government develop a systematic approach for delivering instruction by mail, enabling his children to receive formal education while remaining at home.

The response he received from Alexander Robinson, Superintendent of Education, was discouraging. Robinson believed that correspondence education "cannot, I am afraid, prove successful" without "constant supervision by a teacher."[2] For Robinson, education required physical presence, the embodied relationship between teacher and student that characterised classroom instruction. Without a teacher watching over students, ensuring attention and correcting errors in real time, meaningful learning seemed impossible. Robinson's scepticism reflected widely held assumptions about pedagogical necessity, assumptions that correspondence education would challenge and ultimately transform.

[1] Open School BC, "100 Years: A Timeline," accessed 15 December 2025, https://www.openschool.bc.ca/100years.

[2] Alexander Robinson to Samuel Spetch, January 1919, quoted in Open School BC, "100 Years: A Timeline."

Spetch refused to accept this refusal as final. In April 1919, he renewed his request with persistent determination, and this persistence eventually succeeded. On 13 May 1919, he received word that British Columbia would provide correspondence education to isolated families. Ten days later, the first lessons were mailed to the Spetch children. By September 1919, 86 students had enrolled in the newly established Elementary Correspondence School, including 13 children of lighthouse keepers living on remote coastal stations throughout British Columbia's extensive coastline.

**Table 1**: Timeline of the Spetch Correspondence and Its Immediate Outcomes

| **Date** | **Event and Significance** |
|---|---|
| 30 December 1918 | Samuel Spetch writes to Premier John Oliver requesting correspondence education |
| January 1919 | Superintendent Robinson responds negatively, citing the need for teacher supervision |
| April 1919 | Spetch renews request; demonstrates persistent advocacy for educational access |
| 13 May 1919 | Department approves correspondence education; policy reversal |
| 23 May 1919 | First correspondence lessons mailed to Spetch children |
| September 1919 | 86 students enrolled, including 13 lighthouse keepers' children |
| 1929 | Elementary Correspondence School becomes a separate branch via the Public-School Act amendment |

**Source**: Compiled by the author from Open School BC, "100 Years: A Timeline"; and Gleason, "Families Without Schools."

## Theoretical Orientation and Problem Statement

This article examines the Spetch correspondence through the lens of what historian Ann Laura Stoler calls reading "along the archival grain."[3] This evocative phrase refers to understanding documents within the frameworks and categories that produced them, attending carefully to the assumptions,

[3] Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 1–3.

anxieties, and institutional logics embedded in archival records. Just as wood grain reveals the growth patterns of a tree, showing how environmental conditions shaped organic development, *archival grain* reveals the organising principles that shaped how documents were created, collected, and preserved. Reading along this grain means understanding documents within the frameworks that produced them; reading against it means questioning what those frameworks render invisible, attending to silences and absences as carefully as to presences.

Crucially, I situate this archival analysis within *settler colonial theory*. As Patrick Wolfe argues, settler colonialism differs from extractive colonialism in its orientation toward permanent settlement and its "logic of elimination": "settler colonialism destroys to replace."[4] Where extractive colonialism seeks to exploit Indigenous labour and resources while maintaining Indigenous populations as a workforce, settler colonialism seeks to replace Indigenous populations with settler societies. This theoretical framing compels me to analyse correspondence education's founding within the broader context of settler colonial governance, where the extension of educational services to settler families occurred alongside residential schools designed to eliminate Indigenous people as distinct communities through forced assimilation.

As Camfield argues, in the Canadian scholarly literature, however, the term "settler colony" carries a more specific charge than Wolfe's and Veracini's general frameworks alone acknowledge, and this article engages directly with that debate.[5] As Sunera Thobani demonstrates in *Exalted Subjects*, the national subject of Canada was constructed as racially white, and "exaltation," the process of constituting the ideal Canadian citizen, afforded proprietorial access to land, state services, and institutional recognition that was structurally unavailable to Indigenous peoples and non-white migrants alike.[6] The correspondence education families Mona Gleason identifies as "predominantly white, rural, and working class" were white in a structural

[4] Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 388.

[5] David Camfield, "Settler Colonialism and Labour Studies in Canada: A Preliminary Exploration," *Labour/Le Travail* 83 (2019): 149, https://doi.org/10.1353/llt.2019.0006.

[6] Sunera Thobani, *Exalted Subjects: Studies in the Making of Race and Nation in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 4–7.

rather than incidental sense; their whiteness was constitutive of their standing as settlers entitled to petition the provincial government for educational provision. This article, therefore, follows Sherene Razack's analysis of Canada as a "white settler society" in treating 'whiteness' as structural rather than incidental to settler identity.[7]

A further debate in the Canadian literature concerns whether all non-Indigenous people in Canada should be classified as settlers. Bonita Lawrence and Enakshi Dua have argued that people of colour are settlers regardless of how they arrived; Nandita Sharma and Cynthia Wright counter that applying the settler label to enslaved Africans or unfree indentured migrants is historically inaccurate, since those groups were denied the privileges of settlement.[8] This article qualifies 'settler' with 'white' specifically because the families this paper examines, those who petitioned the provincial government for correspondence education in 1918, were white settler subjects whose racial status entitled them to state recognition in ways explicitly denied to Chinese, South Asian, and Japanese residents of the same province at the same moment. In 1918 in British Columbia, Chinese residents paid a $500 head tax; South Asian residents faced the Continuous Journey Regulations; Japanese Canadians were disenfranchised.

Early correspondence education in British Columbia was framed as a response to children living in geographic isolation. The University of Victoria's Homeroom history of correspondence education notes that, in 1919, John Kyle provided notes and textbooks to "86 children living in isolated parts of the province," marking British Columbia as the first Canadian province to offer elementary courses by correspondence.[9] In the wider distance education literature, similar correspondence systems have been described as responses

[7] Sherene H. Razack, ed., *Race, Space, and the Law: Unmapping a White Settler Society* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2002), 1–3.

[8] Bonita Lawrence and Enakshi Dua, "Decolonizing Antiracism," *Social Justice* 32, no. 4 (2005): 120–43; Nandita Sharma and Cynthia Wright, "Decolonizing Resistance, Challenging Colonial States," *Social Justice* 35, no. 3 (2008): 120–38.

[9] University of Victoria Libraries, "Correspondence Education," *The Homeroom: British Columbia's History of Education Website*, accessed 22 June 2026, https://curric.library.uvic.ca/homeroom/content/topics/programs/corresp.htm.

to the educational needs of "remote and isolated families."[10] Glen Sean Coulthard's critique of the "politics of recognition" adds a further dimension: Canada's liberal mode of negotiating Indigenous-settler relations reproduces colonial power rather than dismantling it, because it requires Indigenous peoples to seek legitimacy through the very state structures that dispossessed them.[11] Spetch's successful advocacy was a story of white settler access to state recognition; Indigenous families in the same province were simultaneously subject to state compulsion. The politics of recognition operated differentially by race.

Three research questions guide this inquiry. First, what do the 1918 Spetch correspondence and related administrative records reveal about the educational philosophy, bureaucratic logics, and social conditions that enabled the Elementary Correspondence School's establishment? Second, how does situating the Spetch correspondence within international developments and settler colonial structures illuminate what was distinctive about British Columbia's approach to educational access? Third, what can contemporary practitioners and scholars gain from genealogical inquiry into archival origins, and what ethical responsibilities accompany the interpretation of colonial-era educational documents?

## Literature Review: International and Provincial Contexts

### *The Origins of Distance Education*

Distance education possesses a longer and more complex history than contemporary discussions often acknowledge. Isaac Pitman began teaching shorthand through correspondence in 1840, often cited as modern correspondence education's beginning.[12] The University of London's External Programme, established in 1858, allowed students throughout the British Empire to prepare for university examinations without attending lectures in London. This innovation created pathways for colonial subjects to obtain

[10] Andrew Higgins, "DEANZ and FLANZ: Tracing the Development of Distance Learning in New Zealand and the Professional Association Supporting It," *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning* 27, no. 2 (2023): 1–17, https://doi.org/10.61468/jofdl.v27i2.655.

[11] Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 3–7.

[12] Renée F. Erdos, *Teaching by Correspondence* (London: Longmans, 1967), 12–15.

British credentials, though access remained limited by economic and social barriers that shaped who could aspire to such examinations.

The Chautauqua Movement, founded in 1874 at a Methodist summer camp in New York State, combined correspondence instruction with summer assemblies, creating a distinctive model of adult education that spread throughout North America.[13] By 1900, the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle had enrolled approximately 2,64,000 students in its reading circles, with women comprising roughly 75 per cent of participants. This gendered pattern reflected both women's limited access to formal higher education and the movement's emphasis on self-improvement within domestic settings. The Chautauqua model demonstrated that structured learning could occur outside institutional walls, a principle that would inform the development of correspondence education.

### *Australian Developments*

The Australian developments are particularly relevant to understanding British Columbia's innovation. Victoria established government correspondence education in 1914, following advocacy from a mother in the Beech Forest region whose children could not access conventional schooling.[14] New South Wales followed in 1916 with the Blackfriars Correspondence School, Western Australia in 1918 with its Correspondence Classes. In each case, the initiative responded to parental advocacy from families in isolated circumstances, families whose geographic situations placed them beyond the reach of conventional school provision, but whose settler status entitled them to expect government educational services.

British Columbia's 1919 establishment fits within this international pattern while displaying distinctive features.[15] As the first Canadian province to establish provincial elementary correspondence education, British Columbia responded to what contemporaries called the "rural school problem"; the

[13] John M. Scott, *The Story of Chautauqua* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1904), 45–52.

[14] Distance Education History Australia and New Zealand, "History of Distance Education in Australia," accessed 10 December 2025, http://www.dehanz.net.au.

[15] Louise Moran, "Genesis of the Open Learning Institute of British Columbia," *Journal of Distance Education* 8, no. 1 (1993): 43–45.

challenge of providing educational services to populations dispersed across vast, geographically challenging territory.[16] The province's mountainous terrain, extensive coastline, and pattern of resource-based settlement created educational challenges distinct from those faced in prairie provinces with their more uniform settlement patterns.

**Table 2**: International Development of Government Elementary Correspondence Education

| **Jurisdiction** | **Year** | **Program Name** | **Primary Catalyst** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Victoria, Australia | 1914 | Correspondence School | Mother's advocacy, Beech Forest region |
| NSW, Australia | 1916 | Blackfriars Correspondence | Geographic isolation, outback families |
| Western Australia | 1918 | Correspondence Classes | Pastoral settlement expansion |
| British Columbia | 1919 | Elementary Correspondence | Father's advocacy (Spetch) |
| New Zealand | 1922 | Correspondence School | Rural isolation, farm families |

**Source**: Compiled by the author from Distance Education History Australia and New Zealand (DEHANZ); Erdos, *Teaching by Correspondence*; and Moran, "Genesis of the Open Learning Institute."

*Provincial Context and Family Demographics*

Mona Gleason's foundational research documented correspondence education families through an analysis of over 500 letters preserved in the British Columbia Archives, finding that these families were predominantly white, rural, and working class.[17] Her analysis reveals families engaged in diverse occupations like mining, logging, fishing, farming, and lighthouse keeping. Many families moved frequently, following seasonal employment or resource extraction opportunities. Correspondence education provided

[16] Paul Stortz, "The Rural School Problem in British Columbia in the 1920s," *BC Studies* 79 (1988): 35–40.

[17] Mona Gleason, "Families Without Schools: Rurality, Correspondence Education, and the Promise of Schooling in Interwar Western Canada," *History of Education Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (2017): 308–12.

continuity for children whose families' economic circumstances required mobility. Gleason's work demonstrates that correspondence education served settler families seeking to maintain presence on isolated lands, lands that had been Indigenous territory before colonial acquisition.

## Methods and Theoretical Framework

### *Scholarly Personal Narrative*

The methodology I employ, which Robert Nash calls *scholarly personal narrative,* requires explicit attention to the researcher's location and how that location shapes interpretive work.[18] Nash argues that personal experience can serve as a "springboard and framework" for scholarship that maintains academic rigour while foregrounding the researcher's presence in the text. This approach emerges from epistemological traditions including *phenomenology* (emphasising lived experience as a valid form of knowledge), *constructivism* (understanding knowledge as actively constructed rather than passively received), and *feminist standpoint theory* (arguing that social position shapes what can be known and how knowledge is produced).

I have spent twenty-five years working within British Columbia's open learning system, primarily at Thompson Rivers University, an institution that traces direct lineage to the correspondence school that Spetch's advocacy created. My career has given me embodied knowledge of how open learning functions; the challenges students face when studying at a distance, the pedagogical approaches that support success across geographic and temporal separation, and the institutional structures that enable and constrain innovation. This practitioner's knowledge shapes how I read archival documents from a century ago, allowing me to recognise continuities and transformations that might escape scholars approaching these materials without such experiential grounding.

### *Practitioner Knowledge Shaping Interpretation*

Let me offer three concrete examples of how my professional experience has shaped specific interpretive moves in this archival analysis. These examples

[18] Robert J. Nash, *Liberating Scholarly Writing: The Power of Personal Narrative* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2004), 24–28.

demonstrate how scholarly personal narrative methodology operates in practice, showing how embodied professional knowledge generates interpretive insights while maintaining scholarly accountability.

**Table 3**: Theoretical Frameworks Applied in This Study

| **Framework** | **Key Scholar(s)** | **Application to This Study** |
|---|---|---|
| Archival Theory | Stoler (2008) | Reading documents along/against the grain for content and silences |
| Silencing the Past | Trouillot (1995) | Identifying four moments where silences enter historical production |
| Settler Colonial Theory | Wolfe (2006) | Understanding education within the logic of elimination |
| Settler Colonialism | Veracini (2010) | Analysing settler society formation and Indigenous displacement |
| Microhistory | Ginzburg (2013) | Single document as a window to broader social structures |
| Personal Narrative | Nash (2004) | Researcher positionality and reflexivity in interpretation |
| Transactional Distance | Moore (1997) | Retrospective analysis of pedagogical relationships |

**Source**: Compiled by the author.

First, when I encountered Robinson's concern about "constant supervision," I immediately recognised this as an early articulation of anxieties that persist in contemporary debates about online education.[19] In my own practice, I have participated in countless faculty meetings where colleagues expressed similar concerns: Can students really learn without an instructor physically present? How can we ensure academic integrity without proctored examinations? These contemporary anxieties helped me understand Robinson's 1919 refusal as expressing a deep intuition that education requires presence, an intuition that correspondence and online education have repeatedly challenged but not entirely dispelled.

[19] Alexander Robinson, *Forty-Eighth Annual Report of the Public Schools of the Province of British Columbia, 1918–1919* (Victoria, BC: King's Printer, 1919).

Second, my experience supervising distance students illuminated the significance of the lighthouse keepers' children in early enrolment records. I have worked with contemporary students in analogous circumstances: parents working at remote mining operations in northern British Columbia, families providing care for elderly relatives in rural communities, and individuals whose health conditions prevent regular attendance. This practitioner's knowledge allowed me to appreciate the lighthouse keepers' children as emblematic of open learning's enduring mission, reaching learners whose circumstances place them beyond the reach of conventional educational provision.

Third, when archival sources mentioned "turnaround time" of approximately six weeks for correspondence between the Peace River region and Victoria,[20] I recognised this as an early version of the challenges I navigate regularly in online course design. Contemporary students expect rapid feedback; research shows that timely responses correlate with student persistence and success. My experience in managing feedback expectations helped me appreciate what six-week delays meant pedagogically: students completing substantial portions of coursework before receiving any indication whether their approach was sound, families maintaining motivation across extended waiting periods, and teachers designing robust enough materials to function without real-time correction.

## *Archival Theory Framework*

Archival theory, as I employ it here, treats archives as constructed artefacts requiring interpretation rather than as neutral repositories of historical facts. Michel-Rolph Trouillot identifies four moments at which silences enter historical production: the moment of fact creation (what gets recorded), the moment of fact assembly (what gets collected and preserved), the moment of fact retrieval (what gets accessed and cited), and the moment of retrospective significance (what gets interpreted as meaningful).[21] Each moment involves exercises of power shaping what can subsequently be known.

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[20] British Columbia Department of Education, *Sixty-Fourth Annual Report of the Public Schools of the Province of British Columbia, 1934–1935* (Victoria, BC: King's Printer, 1935).

[21] Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 26-29.

Trouillot's concept of *banality* proves particularly relevant to this analysis. He argues that certain historical processes become *unthinkable* because they exceed available conceptual frameworks, remaining invisible even when evidence exists. I suggest that the potential of correspondence education was similarly unthinkable within Robinson's framework. Successful education without constant teacher supervision exceeded his conceptual categories, rendering Spetch's proposal literally inconceivable until persistence forced reconsideration.

Carlo Ginzburg's 1980 micro-historical method uses the exceptional-normal dialectic to demonstrate how a close reading of an individual case can illuminate broader social patterns. Precisely because these exceptional cases generate extensive documentation, they can reveal systemic institutional assumptions that remain completely invisible under typical circumstances. Spetch's correspondence, preserved because it initiated a new program, allows examination of assumptions that shaped routine educational administration.

## *Settler Colonial Theory*

*Settler colonialism*, as theorised by Patrick Wolfe and elaborated by Lorenzo Veracini, differs from extractive colonialism in its orientation toward permanent settlement.[22] The *logic of elimination* operates through multiple means: killing, removal, containment, and assimilation. Residential schools exemplified eliminationist logic through forced assimilation; children were removed from families, forbidden to speak Indigenous languages, and subjected to systematic efforts to destroy cultural transmission. This was an elimination pursued through children's bodies and minds.

Eva Mackey's work on settler colonial affect examines how settlers experience and manage the affective dimensions of occupying Indigenous lands.[23] Educational provision, I suggest, represents one mechanism through which settler colonial societies manage anxieties about belonging. The correspondence school enabled settler families to imagine permanent presence

[22] Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview*, 2nd ed. (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 70.

[23] Eva Mackey, *Unsettled Expectations: Uncertainty, Land and Settler Decolonization* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2016), 45-52.

on the lands they occupied and to project futures for their children that assumed continued settlement. Educational provision transformed precarious occupation into normalised belonging.

### *Distance Education Theory*

I apply distance education theories retrospectively as heuristic tools for understanding historical practice rather than as frameworks that guided their original development. Michael Moore's theory of *transactional distance* provides conceptual vocabulary for analysing relationships between teachers and learners separated by geography.[24] Transactional distance refers to the psychological and communicative space between the teacher and the learner, shaped by the *structure* (rigidity or flexibility of educational programs), *dialogue* (communication between participants), and *learner autonomy* (capacity for self-direction).

Börje Holmberg's concept of *guided didactic conversation* illuminates another dimension.[25] Holmberg argued that effective distance education creates conversational relationships between teacher and learner, even though written materials are used. Course materials should address students directly, anticipate questions, and create a sense of dialogue despite physical separation. Early correspondence materials demonstrate awareness of this principle, even without formal theorisation.

## Interpretation: Reading the Spetch Correspondence

### *The Initial Request: 30 December 1918*

Spetch composed his letter six weeks after the Armistice ended the Great War, amid the devastating Spanish influenza pandemic sweeping across British Columbia. The timing matters because the war years had disrupted normal governance, redirecting resources and attention toward military priorities, and peace created space for renewed attention to domestic concerns, including education. Spetch addressed the premier rather than educational officials,

[24] Michael G. Moore, "Theory of Transactional Distance," in *Theoretical Principles of Distance Education*, ed. Desmond Keegan (London: Routledge, 1997), 22–29.

[25] Börje Holmberg, *Theory and Practice of Distance Education*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2005), 47.

signalling the importance he attached to his request and perhaps indicating awareness of the limitations of bureaucratic channels. His appeal to political authority rather than to educational administration suggests a strategic calculation to secure attention for an unprecedented request.

Reading Spetch's request through settler-colonial theory illuminates dimensions that a purely educational analysis might overlook. Spetch was asking the provincial government to extend educational provision, enabling his family to remain on isolated land, land that had been Indigenous territory before colonial acquisition. The flexibility he sought would allow his family to maintain settler presence where conventional provision could not reach. Correspondence education, in this reading, served not only educational purposes but also territorial ones; it enabled settlement in locations where conventional schooling was impossible, thereby extending settler presence across Indigenous lands.[26]

### *Robinson's Refusal and Epistemic Limits*

Reading Robinson's assumptions along the archival grain reveals the epistemic anxieties underlying his position. Robinson was concerned about whether education could maintain efficacy when separated from institutional forms. His reference to "constant supervision" suggests anxiety about control: without a teacher physically present, how could educational authorities ensure that learning occurred? How could they verify that students completed their own work? How could they maintain the disciplinary structures that characterised classroom instruction?

Applying Trouillot's concept of banality, the possibility Spetch proposed was genuinely unthinkable within Robinson's framework.[27] Education without teacher presence exceeded his conceptual categories. Robinson's scepticism expressed not merely opinion but institutional common sense, the accumulated assumptions that shaped how educational officials understood their work. Spetch's innovation required challenging that common sense, demonstrating through persistence and eventual success that education could function differently than established frameworks assumed.

[26] Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*, 32–38.
[27] Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 70–73.

*Persistence and Approval*

Spetch's renewed April 1919 request exemplifies the persistence characterising successful educational advocacy. The historical record does not preserve the specific arguments Spetch made in his second appeal, but the outcome is clear; sometime between April and 13 May 1919, the Department reversed its position. This reversal merits attention. What changed Robinson's mind, or what forces overrode his objections? The archival record remains silent on these questions, but possibilities include political pressure from the premier's office, recognition of the Australian precedent, or simply Spetch's persistence wearing down bureaucratic resistance.[28]

**Table 4**: Institutional Evolution of British Columbia's Open Learning System

| Period | Institution | Key Development and Significance |
|---|---|---|
| 1919 | Elementary Correspondence School | First Canadian provincial correspondence education |
| 1929 | Separate Branch (Public-School Act) | Legislative recognition; institutional permanence |
| 1978 | Open Learning Institute | Post-secondary extension; adult learner focus |
| 1988 | Open Learning Agency | Broadcast capacity added; Knowledge Network |
| 2005 | Thompson Rivers University | University status; merger with a regional institution |
| 2003- | BCcampus | Provincial collaboration; open educational resources |

**Source:** Compiled by the author from Moran, "Genesis of the Open Learning Institute"; and Open School BC, "100 Years: A Timeline."

The 13 May 1919 reversal transformed a single family's advocacy into provincial policy. The Department moved quickly once the decision was made; lessons were mailed to the Spetch children on May 23, just ten days later. By September 1919, 86 students had enrolled, including the lighthouse keepers' children who remain prominent in institutional memory.[29] The

[28] Gleason, "Families Without Schools," 315–18.

[29] Open School BC, "100 Years: A Timeline."

lighthouse keepers' children carried symbolic weight; their fathers served essential functions maintaining navigation safety along British Columbia's dangerous coastline, and their geographic isolation was both extreme and permanent. If correspondence education could serve lighthouse families, it could serve anyone.

*Institutional Evolution*

The institution that emerged from Spetch's advocacy evolved through several distinct phases, each responding to changing technological possibilities and social demands. The Elementary Correspondence School became a separate branch within the educational bureaucracy through a 1929 amendment to the Public-School Act, marking legislative recognition of correspondence education's permanent place in provincial provision.[30] Throughout subsequent decades, the school adapted to technological change through radio broadcasts supplemented print materials beginning in the 1940s, television in the 1960s, and eventually digital technologies beginning in the 1990s.

The Open Learning Institute, established in 1978, extended the principles of correspondence education into post-secondary education, serving adult learners who needed flexible access to credentials. The Open Learning Agency (1988) combined educational provision with broadcast capacity through the Knowledge Network. The early 2000s brought significant restructuring; the Open University component merged with the University College of the Cariboo to form Thompson Rivers University in 2005, while other functions were distributed to the BC campus and the provincial government. These institutional transformations demonstrate both continuity and change: the core commitment to reaching learners in isolated circumstances persists, while specific institutional forms adapt to changing conditions.

## Archival Silences: What the Record Excludes

*Indigenous Education and Settler Colonial Structures*

The provincial education records that document the founding of correspondence education remain systematically silent about Indigenous educational experiences. This silence reflects constitutional structures; under

[30] Moran, "Genesis of the Open Learning Institute," 50–55.

the Canadian Constitution, Indigenous education fell under federal jurisdiction (Section 91[24]) while provincial education remained provincial responsibility (Section 93). The jurisdictional division meant provincial archives document services to settler families, while Indigenous education appears in different archives entirely, maintained by different governments according to different administrative logics.[31]

**Table 5**: Contrasting Educational Approaches in Early Twentieth-Century British Columbia

| Dimension | Settler Correspondence Ed. | Indigenous Residential Schools |
|---|---|---|
| Jurisdiction | Provincial (BC) | Federal (Indian Affairs) |
| Family location | Children remain at home | Children removed from families |
| Parental role | Central; parents supervise learning | Systematically excluded |
| Language policy | English instruction; no restriction | Indigenous languages forbidden |
| Cultural orientation | Reinforces settler identity | Eliminates Indigenous identity |
| Primary catalyst | Family advocacy | State compulsion |
| Underlying logic | Educational access/settlement | Cultural elimination/assimilation |

**Source**: Compiled by the author, drawing on Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism"; Miller, *Shingwauk's Vision*; Milloy, *A National Crime*; and Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Honouring the Truth*.

During the same years that the provincial government developed correspondence education to serve isolated settler families, the federal government operated residential schools designed to remove Indigenous children from their families and communities. J. R. Miller traced the collaboration between churches and government in establishing schools that

[31] Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," 390.

sought, in the notorious phrase, to "kill the Indian in the child."[32] John Milloy documented how federal policy created a system that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission would later designate as cultural genocide.[33]

Sean Carleton argues that education served as a technology of dispossession, legitimating colonial occupation while training Indigenous peoples for subordinate positions in the emerging colonial economy.[34] Marie Battiste's work on decolonising education argues that genuine transformation requires centring Indigenous knowledge systems rather than merely including Indigenous content within colonial educational structures.[35] Linda Tuhiwai Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies* provides guidance for researchers engaging with colonial archives, emphasising the need to recognise Indigenous peoples as subjects rather than objects of research.[36] Dwayne Donald's concept of *ethical relationality* offers resources for understanding how settler and Indigenous educational histories might be brought into conversation without collapsing their differences.[37]

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission designated the residential school system as cultural genocide, documenting systematic efforts to destroy Indigenous cultures through forced assimilation of children.[38] British Columbia had numerous residential schools, including Kamloops Indian Residential School (established 1890), Kuper Island (1890), St. Mary's (1861), and Alberni (1891). The correspondence education that offered flexibility to settler families represented a privilege that Indigenous families were denied.

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[32] J. R. Miller, *Shingwauk's Vision: A History of Native Residential Schools* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 89–95.

[33] John S. Milloy, *A National Crime: The Canadian Government and the Residential School System, 1879–1986* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1999), 51–58.

[34] Sean Carleton, *Lessons in Legitimacy: Colonialism, Capitalism, and the Rise of State Schooling in British Columbia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2022), 12–18.

[35] Marie Battiste, *Decolonizing Education: Nourishing the Learning Spirit* (Saskatoon: Purich Publishing, 2014), 26–32.

[36] Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 2nd ed. (London: Zed Books, 2012), 1–5.

[37] Dwayne Donald, "Indigenous Métissage: A Decolonizing Research Sensibility," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 25, no. 5 (2012): 535–40.

[38] Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report* (Ottawa: TRC, 2015), 1–3.

Where Spetch could advocate for educational access that kept his children at home, Indigenous parents had children taken from them by force of law.

### *Women's Educational Labour*

The archive remains largely silent about women's contributions to correspondence education, despite mothers typically playing central roles in supervising children's daily studies. Gleason notes that while mothers were usually primary supervisors of correspondence lessons, letters preserved in archives were often signed by fathers.[39] This gendered pattern of attribution obscures women's educational labour, rendering their contributions invisible in the historical record. Alison Prentice documented how the feminisation of teaching transformed elementary education in Canada while simultaneously devaluing teachers' work through association with domesticity.[40] Veronica Strong-Boag provides essential context for understanding the lives of mothers who supervised correspondence lessons in interwar British Columbia, showing how domestic responsibilities shaped women's opportunities and constraints.[41]

### *Children's Perspectives*

The archive also excludes children's perspectives on correspondence education, preserving adult communications while leaving students' experiences largely undocumented. Neil Sutherland demonstrated how oral history and careful reading of adult documents could illuminate childhood experience despite archival limitations.[42] His methodology suggests approaches for recovering children's voices from correspondence education records. Occasional glimpses of children's experiences appear in adult letters, but these are mediated through parental interpretation. Some letters report children's enthusiasm for lessons; others mention struggles with isolation or

[39] Gleason, "Families Without Schools," 320–22.

[40] Alison Prentice, "The Feminization of Teaching," in *The Neglected Majority: Essays in Canadian Women's History*, ed. Susan Mann Trofimenkoff and Alison Prentice (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977), 49–52.

[41] Veronica Strong-Boag, *The New Day Recalled: Lives of Girls and Women in English Canada, 1919–1939* (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman, 1988), 78–85.

[42] Neil Sutherland, *Growing Up: Childhood in English Canada from the Great War to the Age of Television* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 145–50.

difficulties maintaining motivation without peer interaction. These fragments suggest varied experiences that encompassed both the satisfactions of learning and the challenges of educational isolation.

## Discussion: Implications and Limitations

This study builds upon Gleason's foundational archival work while extending the analysis through explicit engagement with settler-colonial theory. Whereas Gleason primarily focused on family experiences of correspondence education, I have foregrounded the structural relationship between settler correspondence education and Indigenous residential schooling, reading these parallel systems as expressions of differential colonial governance. The theoretical contribution lies in demonstrating how settler colonial theory illuminates dimensions of distance education history that educational history alone cannot capture.[43]

The scholarly personal narrative methodology demonstrates how practitioner knowledge can enrich historical inquiry while maintaining scholarly accountability. My twenty-five years of experience in open learning enabled specific interpretive insights; recognising continuities between Robinson's anxieties and contemporary debates, appreciating the pedagogical implications of turnaround time, and understanding the lighthouse keepers' children as emblematic of open learning's enduring mission. These insights emerge from embodied professional knowledge that purely archival research might not generate.[44]

The constitutional division that assigned Indigenous and provincial education to different jurisdictions created an archival separation that this study cannot fully overcome. The federal archives containing residential school records lie outside my scope and expertise. While I have sought to contextualise provincial records within broader settler-colonial structures, parallel archival research in federal holdings would enable a more direct comparison of educational experiences. Indigenous-centred research, conducted by or in

[43] Nash, *Liberating Scholarly Writing*, 56–60.
[44] Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*, 44–48.

collaboration with Indigenous scholars and communities, would provide perspectives that this settler analysis cannot claim to offer.[45]

The reliance on secondary sources for the Spetch correspondence itself represents another limitation. Future research involving direct archival consultation might reveal dimensions that secondary accounts have overlooked. The letters themselves, their physical form, handwriting, paper quality, and preservation condition, might yield interpretive possibilities unavailable through secondary accounts. Archival research always involves such limitations; acknowledging them enables readers to assess the analysis appropriately.

## Conclusion: Inheritance and Responsibility

The letter Spetch posted on 30 December 1918 initiated a sequence of events that transformed educational provision in British Columbia and established precedents that would influence the development of distance education throughout Canada and beyond. This study has examined that letter through frameworks drawn from archival theory, settler colonial studies, distance education scholarship, and scholarly personal narrative methodology. The theoretical contribution lies in demonstrating how these diverse frameworks illuminate dimensions of distance education history that any single approach would miss.[46]

Understanding where we began illuminates where we are and suggests where we might go. Open learning possesses a distinctive history shaping contemporary practice in ways practitioners may recognise intuitively yet rarely examine systematically. The Spetch correspondence reveals that open learning began with parental advocacy for children's educational access, placing access at the centre of open learning's identity from its origins. This commitment to access remains central to contemporary open learning practice, informing institutional missions, pedagogical approaches, and policy advocacy.

[45] Veracini, *Settler Colonialism*, 75–80.
[46] Miller, *Shingwauk's Vision*, 125–30.

Yet the access provided was within settler-colonial structures. Correspondence education served settler families seeking to maintain a presence on Indigenous lands; it developed alongside residential schools that denied Indigenous families any choice about their children's education. Contemporary practitioners inherit both the commitment to access and the colonial structures within which that commitment developed. Historical consciousness requires acknowledging this inheritance rather than celebrating origins without attending to context.[47]

Practitioners with historical consciousness understand that the challenges they face are typically versions of those faced by previous generations. Turnaround-time concerns have contemporary analogues in response-time discussions. Anxieties about education without presence manifest in debates over the legitimacy of online learning. Technological change continues to transform delivery mechanisms while core pedagogical questions persist. Historical consciousness also requires acknowledging the settler colonial dimensions of open learning's origins. Practitioners committed to reconciliation must grapple with this inheritance, finding ways to honour access commitments while acknowledging colonial contexts.

Future research might extend this archival approach to examine other Canadian founding moments, compare British Columbia's developments with those of Australian and New Zealand counterparts in greater detail, or develop Indigenous-centred research that addresses the silences this study has identified. Oral history represents a particularly promising method; practitioners who experienced transitions from correspondence to broadcast to digital delivery could provide perspectives that archival records cannot capture. As the generation that experienced correspondence education firsthand ages, the opportunity to capture their perspectives becomes increasingly urgent.[48]

For me personally, this research has transformed how I understand my own work. When I support isolated learners, I participate in a tradition that stretches back more than a century, dating to Spetch's advocacy. When I

[47] Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future*, 135–38.

[48] Battiste, *Decolonizing Education*, 165–70.

navigate debates about the legitimacy of online education, I recognise them as echoes of Robinson's scepticism encountering Spetch's persistence. The curiosity I felt in that staff meeting has become something larger, a sense of responsibility to understand and transmit a complex history that continues to unfold, a history that demands both celebration of access achievements and acknowledgement of colonial structures within which those achievements occurred.

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# Power, Politics, Protest and Posters: Visual Propaganda, Mass Mobilisation, and Resistance in the Interwar Period

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*Political Posters were among the most powerful forms of mass communication in the interwar period, serving as a medium of state power, ideology, and popular resistance. In this article, political posters are analysed as important tools for changing collective consciousness, organising populations, and establishing political power, and as more than just decoration or information art, as suggested by Gerard Mendel's concept of the poster as "social power". The study, which includes posters from the Soviet Union, Germany, Spain, and the United States from the First World War to the Second, situates the production of the poster within broader historical change characterised by revolution, economic crisis, authoritarianism, and ideological polarisation. The article examines a historical-analytical approach and data from the most important digital and institutional archives to examine the use of visual strategies, including the use of colour symbolism, iconography, caricature, and emotional appeal, by the states to promote their propaganda and by the oppositional artists to express dissent. Special emphasis is given on Soviet mass-mobilisation posters, Nazi iconographic supremacy and fear propaganda, the Russian Revolution, and the Spanish Civil War images that demonstrate the ideology of conflict. The article also examines posters as instruments of protest, including the work of anti-war artists such as Käthe Kollwitz, who opposed militarism and authoritarianism. This study uses posters as primary historical documents to illustrate how such documents have remained important in the construction of power, ideology, and resistance in times of crisis and transformation.*

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**Keywords**: Posters, interwar period, propaganda, mass mobilisation, visual culture, ideology

## Introduction

Posters have a special place in modern history, both as works of art and as tools of political influence. Posters have the purpose of communicating ideas in a way that is primarily visual, through colour, imagery, symbolism, and composition, and not only as text. Posters were "the medium for the construction of a pictorial rhetoric of . . . national identities", identities upon

which the waging of war hinged.[1] Gérard Mendel's characterisation of the poster as a form of "social power". Mendel's concept of *actepouvoir*, "power of action" or social power, developed in his "sociopsychoanalytic" work, helps explain the political significance of posters produced during the events of May 1968 in France, as presented in his book *La révolte contre le père: Une introduction à la sociopsychanalyse* (1968). Later on, historians like Max Gallo have read political posters not only as tools of propaganda but also as expressions of collective social agency. It is for this reason that the poster is highlighted for its ability to shape collective consciousness and behaviour, especially in times of crisis and change. Maurice Rickards also noted that, far from being simply decorative artefacts, posters have been a key part of public opinion formation, the legitimation of authority, and the expression of dissent. In a world without radio and television, and where newspapers were still the preserve of a literate minority, the poster was one of the big instruments of mass communication.[2]

Political posters were particularly visible during the interwar years as states and political parties sought to mobilise the masses after the First World War. As a consequence of the Russian Revolution of 1917, the advent of fascism and Nazism, the Spanish Civil War, and the polarisation of ideological camps, visual propaganda took on an unprecedented level of significance. Posters were used by governments to promote loyalty, the need for sacrifice, demonisation of enemies and the normalisation of militarisation. Meanwhile, the poster was also used by artists and oppositional groups to communicate, protest, critique violence, and communicate the human toll of war. Even though the posters were historically important, they were traditionally not taken seriously as historical sources. In recent years, however, cultural and visual historical studies have seen posters as significant primary sources for the visual construction of power, ideology and resistance. This article is part of that study by comparing Soviet, German, Spanish, and American interwar posters and analysing state propaganda, as well as counter-narratives of protest. It also examines the role of Soviet and Nazi posters as instruments of

[1] Steve Baker, "Describing Images of the National Self: Popular Accounts of the Construction of Pictorial Identity in the First World War Poster," *Oxford Art Journal* 13, no. 2 (1990): 24.

[2] Maurice Rickards, *Posters of the First World War* (New York: Walker and Company, 1968), 8.

domination, as sites of ideological conflict, and as posters of cultural resistance in different countries.

Scholarly interest in posters as historical and cultural sources has expanded significantly since the mid-twentieth century. In *The Poster in History,* Max Gallo provides us with a concept that frames posters as reflections of society and politics, from the Republic of the Revolution to the late twentieth century. Similarly, Alain Weill, in *The Poster: A Worldwide Survey and History,* provides us with a broad international perspective, examining the movement of styles, symbols, and techniques. Posters were further put at the heart of wartime propaganda in Maurice Rickards' *The Rise and Fall of the Poster* and Peter Darracott's *Posters of World War II*. Posters use repetition, emotional appeal, and symbolic condensation to communicate complex ideologies to mass audiences in a short time. Studies of revolutionary images indicate that political iconography, including national symbols, heroes and demonised enemies, is an important aspect of this process. The collections of posters have been well preserved and curated in institutional archives, notably in the British Museum, the Hoover Institution Archives and the British Library. These repositories have rendered it possible to reconsider posters as historical evidence, thereby enabling researchers to view them as part of official propaganda and oppositional visual cultures in their original political contexts. This research uses a historical-analytical method with a visual analysis technique. Posters were gathered from digital archives and museum collections, both from the University of Missouri and from other international institutions. The posters chosen are from the Soviet Union, Germany, Spain, and the United States and span a spectrum of ideologies and political agendas from 1917 to 1939.

The First World War had changed the course of world history. During the interwar years, revolutionary events such as the Bolshevik Revolution and the Great Depression occurred. The effects of the Russian Revolution of 1917 were not limited to Russia; they extended to many other countries and led to a new global political consciousness. At this time, the United States announced President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points and was heavily involved in the Paris Peace Conference. Based on these principles, the League of Nations was founded. But for a number of domestic political reasons, the United States had not wholly embraced international undertakings and the U.S. Senate, as well

as parts of the public, were unhappy with the president and the Democratic Party. The First World War brought significant social, political, and economic changes to Europe. In many European countries, the spread of democracy seemed to be gaining pace after the war. Democratic systems were eroded or failed in Germany, Italy, Austria-Hungary, Poland, Greece, Bulgaria, Spain and Portugal, allowing authoritarian and dictatorial systems to emerge.

Among these rulers were Adolf Hitler in Germany and General Francisco Franco in Spain. All of these factors combined made the Second World War inevitable: the failure of the peace settlement, the severe conditions attached to the Treaty of Versailles, the development of aggressive nationalism in Italy and Germany, a growing desire to expand into colonies, the rise of militarism, the rivalry in foreign policy and the failure of appeasement policies. Hence, the two decades between the First World War and the Second World War can be seen as a continuum of preparation, in which various political groupings prepared themselves for yet another war. In this regard, two opposing camps of power developed: the Allied Powers (Britain, France, Russia, and the United States) and the Axis Powers (Germany, Italy, and Japan). Both sides used posters as an important mass communication and propaganda tool for mobilising their populations for war, demonising the other side and claiming superiority of their own national ideologies.

**Soviet Posters: Education, Mobilisation, and Revolutionary Symbolism**

In the context of the Soviet Union, posters were used in distinctive ways, not only during global conflicts such as the World Wars but also during internal revolutions that reshaped the nation. The Bolshevik Revolution marked the onset of poster use, which continued in numerous political contexts thereafter. According to Kenez, the Soviet Union "thought of propaganda as part of education."[3] The Russian Revolution was, without any doubt, of great importance for the symbolic imagery of socialist movements after 1917. Analysing the nature of their posters will give us an idea of the characteristics of Soviet poster art. One striking feature is the use of colour, especially red. Soviet posters often used red symbolically. Red was not just the colour of

[3] Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917–1929* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 8.

revolution and communism; it also represented fire, holy war, salvation, hope, and even faith in traditional Russian icons.[4]

**Figure 1**: Gustav Klutsis, Long Live the USSR, Model of Brotherhood among the Workers of World Nationalities (1935).
**Source**: Brown Digital Repository, Brown University Library, "Long Live the USSR, Model of Brotherhood among the Workers of World Nationalities," accessed 15 February 2026, https://repository.library.brown.edu/studio/item/bdr:89365/

This strategic use of red made a deep psychological impact. Lithographic painting played a key role in producing these visuals. Anita Pisch stated, "The red banner is the most frequently employed motif in the Soviet propaganda poster. Of the 389 posters in the research sample, the banner appears in 275, and several more utilise a plain red backdrop that evokes both the banner and the red background found in Russian Orthodox icons."[5] As an example, one poster[6] (Figure 1) proclaims "Long live the USSR, the model of brotherhood among the workers of all nationalities," presenting the Soviet Union as an ideal of unity and solidarity across ethnic and national divisions. The National

[4] Mary Ginsberg, ed., *Communist Posters* (London: Reaktion Books, 2017), 33.

[5] Anita Pisch, *Stalin in Soviet Posters, 1929–1953: Archetypes, Inventions and Fabrications* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2016), 152.

[6] Brown Digital Repository, Brown University Library, "Communism Means Soviets Plus the Electrification of the Whole Country," accessed 15 February 2026, https://repository.library.brown.edu/studio/item/bdr:89365/.

emblem of the country is used in the new creation of the Government, a good example being the cult of ideal workers as propaganda in the twentieth century by communist and socialist regimes. An alternative strategy is the use of material symbols of nationhood.[7] Soviet propaganda was remarkably effective because it smartly adopted the colour schemes, illustration styles, formats, and visual symbols already familiar to the public.

**Figure 2.** Gustav Klutsis, The Revolutionary Movement AGITPROP Communist Party of the Soviet Union (1927).
**Source**: Brown Digital Repository, Brown University Library, "Long Live the USSR, Model of Brotherhood among the Workers of World Nationalities," accessed 15 February 2026, https://repository.library.brown.edu/studio/item/bdr:89365/.

The Soviet Union frequently used the images of its leaders in posters. In one of the posters (Figure 2), Marx and Lenin are depicted side by side, conveying the essence of the Soviet ideology. Lenin is a symbol of communism as applied to the Soviet Union, while Marx is the theoretical and ideological foundation of communism. Bringing both images together on the same poster makes

[7] David Welch, *The Story of Propaganda in 50 Images* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2022), 45.

communist ideology more easily understood and convincing to the general public, and it also visually connects two aspects of politics: abstract theory and the reality of political life. Another example of a poster (Figure 3) shows how leaders like Lenin and Stalin are portrayed as emerging directly from the hearts of the people, as if they were 'truly the leaders' of the common masses. To spread their ideology more effectively, they also used the images of Marx and Engels, connecting their present movement to the roots of communist thought. Poster artists in the Soviet Union in the 1930s used three types of photomontages. "The most widespread approach combined various photographs into a montage. In general, Klutsis used this style. The second combined photographs and drawings. The third used photographs that incorporated visual tricks and distortions."[8] These were the main approaches and techniques for their poster design.

**Figure 3**: Gustav Klutsis, Raise Higher the Banner of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin! (1936). **Source**: Brown Digital Repository, Brown University Library, "Raise Higher the Banner of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin!," accessed 15 February 2026, https://repository.library.brown.edu/studio/item/bdr:89326/.

Poster used during the War for mass mobilisation. In the Soviet Union, we observed how posters were used in various ways to mobilise women. For

[8] Victoria E. Bonnell, *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 29.

example, the poster, "Be a Hero."[9] showed a mother encouraging her son to go to war. But women's roles extended far beyond motivation; they actively contributed to the war effort by stepping in to fill the labour gap when men went to the front lines. Another powerful example is a poster addressed to women shock workers. It carries the message: "Strengthen shock brigades, master the machinery" (Figure 4). This call urged women to take part in productive labour and support the economy and the community through industrial work.

**Figure 4**: Women shock workers, strengthen the shock brigades… (1931)
**Source**: MCB Collection. "Valentina Kulagina." Accessed 26 March 2026. https://mcbcollection.com/valentina-kulagina.

**Figure 5**: All-Russian Central Alliance of Cooperatives. Women, enter the cooperatives! (1919).
**Source**: Brown Digital Repository, Brown University Library, "Long Live the USSR—The Banner of the Great Friendship of the Peoples of Our Country," accessed 2 March 2026, https://repository.library.brown.edu/studio/item/bdr:89379/.

After the Bolshevik Revolution, the government also encouraged women to join the communes. Following the formation of the All-Russian Central Alliance of Cooperatives, posters appeared with slogans like: "Women, enter

[9] Brown Digital Repository, Brown University Library, accessed 2 March 2026, https://repository.library.brown.edu/studio/item/bdr:89349/.

the cooperatives!" (Figure 5), emphasising the need for women's active participation in building the socialist state.

**Figure 6**: Kukryniksy, this evil enemy won't get out of the knot we've got him in! (1942), **Source**: University of Connecticut, William Benton Museum of Art, "Views and Re-Views: Soviet Political Posters and Cartoons," accessed 2 March 2026, https://benton.uconn.edu/2011/01/25/views-and-re-views-soviet-political-posters-and-cartoons/.

We also see how Soviet posters criticised Nazism in a strikingly satirical, even humorous, way. The use of cartoons is one of the most significant features of propaganda posters, and this example captures that perfectly. In this poster, there is a caption written in Russian which translates to: "This evil enemy won't get out of the knot we've got him in! Treaty of Solidarity between the Soviet Union, England, and the United States." Figure 6 conveys the historical and political narratives by depicting the alliance formed before World War II, in which the Soviet Union joined hands with Great Britain and the United States. In this way, we can understand posters not just as artistic expressions, but as a visual language of history, telling us stories of ideology, resistance, and power. By using propaganda, the state could 'sell' its goals to the populace whose support it required. However, as German authorities and the advocates of propaganda formulated the domestic propaganda campaign, they

conceptualised it not as an address to members of a democratic electorate but instead as a proclamation to the willing subjects of the German Empire.[10]

**Nazi Germany Posters: Iconography, Fear, and Emotional Manipulation**

Meanwhile, propaganda posters were widely used in Nazi camps to disseminate ideology and influence public perception. In general terms, propaganda refers to information that is deliberately spread to shape opinions or promote a particular political cause. Over time, the term has increasingly acquired negative connotations. As a result, related terms such as "brainwashing" and "disinformation" are frequently used as synonyms.[11] Another important method used to spread ideology was visual iconography. In political contexts, specific symbols, forms, and visual compositions are often associated with particular ideological movements. Socialist movements, for instance, frequently relied on recognisable visual motifs and symbolic imagery. These recurring visual elements help define what may be described as socialist iconography and reveal its connections with other politically identified visual images, symbols, and traditions.[12]

A German poster (Figure 7) is a striking example of Nazi propaganda that demonstrates how iconography was used to assert power, create fear, and mobilise support. The composition is dominated by the swastika, the central symbol of National Socialism, placed prominently against a bold red background. The Nazi sword is also displayed as a symbol of power and action. In the image, the sword pierces a snake that passes through a red Star of David. The snake releases words linked to Germany's political and economic crises—such as usury, Versailles, unemployment, Marxism, Bolshevism, inflation, corruption, and other issues—along with the names of individuals associated with financial scandals. Through this imagery, the poster attempts to portray Nazism as the force that would eliminate these

[10] Kathleen G. Chapman, *Expressionism and Poster Design in Germany, 1905–1922: Between Spirit and Commerce* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2018), 207.

[11] Steven A. Seidman, *Posters, Propaganda, and Persuasion in Election Campaigns Around the World and Through History: A Study in the Aesthetics of Persuasion* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 7.

[12] Berit Sahlström, *Political Posters in Ethiopia and Mozambique: Visual Imagery in a Revolutionary Context* (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 1990), 3.

perceived threats and restore Germany. Spain also used visual symbols and imagery in its posters to warn people about the perceived dangers of communism (Figure 8). These political propaganda posters show how artists relied on recognisable visual elements to convey ideological messages and influence public opinion.

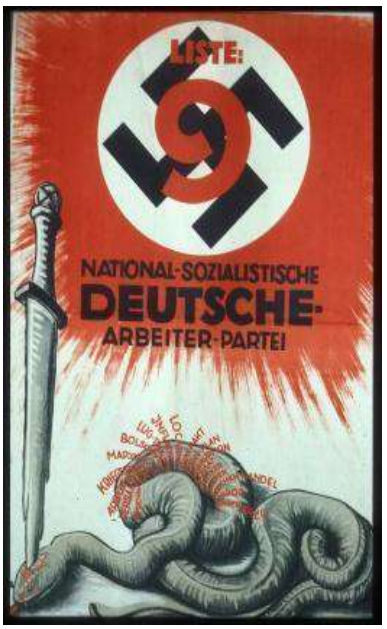


**Figure 7**: Charles Levene, The Serpent of German Evil (NSDAP), 1930.
**Source**: Harvard University, Political Poster Collection, "The Serpent of German Evil," accessed 3 March 2026, https://hist1049-20.omeka.fas.harvard.edu/items/show/30.

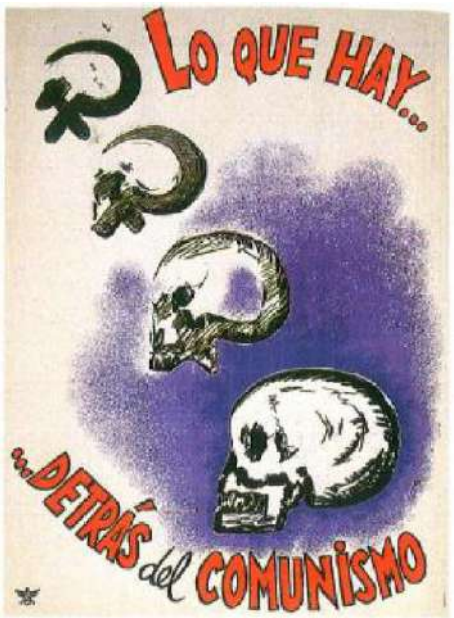


**Figure 8**: *Lo que hay detrás del comunismo,* 1937 [What lies behind Communism].
**Source**: Hoover Institution Library & Archives, Digital Collections, Stanford University, "The Generalissimo," accessed 7 March 2026, https://digitalcollections.hoover.org/objects/25877.

Nazi posters refined this formula, intensifying the fear of the Bolshevik-Jew, glorifying the front soldier of the war posters, and romanticising the family.[13] In another German poster's text: "Führer, we will follow you" (Figure 9). These are examples of his acceptability among the people at that time. In *Mein Kampf*,

[13] Peter Paret, Beth Irwin Lewis, and Paul Paret, *Persuasive Images: Posters of War and Revolution from the Hoover Institution Archives* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 131.

Adolf Hitler repeatedly uses the term *Führer* (leader)[14] to articulate the principle of absolute leadership within the Nazi movement. This ideological formulation can be connected to the role of visual propaganda, particularly posters. Since such political texts were largely beyond the reach of the general public, especially among illiterate or semi-literate populations, posters functioned as an essential medium for translating and disseminating these literary and ideological ideas into accessible visual forms for the masses. He mesmerised the German populace and gained power through elections. However, his mastery of election tactics, particularly in distributing campaign posters, played a significant role in his rise to power. After gaining power, he announced his achievement through posters. It is noticeable that Hitler is magnified there. He 'stands up' among the masses.

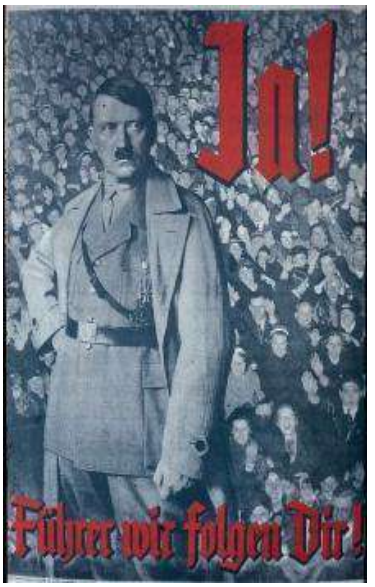


**Figure 9**: *Reichspropagandaleitung der NSDAP, Ja! Führer, Wir Folgen Dir!* [Yes! Führer, We Will Follow You!].
**Source**: Imperial War Museum, "Poster Collection," accessed 7 March 2026, https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/41135.

**Figure 10**: Frantz Würbel, Mothers, fight for your children! (1934)
**Source**: Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), "Poster Collection," accessed 7 March 2026, https://collections.lacma.org/node/207876.

This modern war was also conceptualised as "total, a war that mobilises not only men of fighting age and ability but also all sectors of society, all members

[14] Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1943), 2: chap. 9, "Basic Ideas Regarding the Meaning and Organization of the SA."

of the populace, including women and children."[15] In a poster of Germany, the slogan at the top, "Mothers, fight for your children!"(Figure 10), directly addresses women, framing war not as a political or military decision but as a moral and maternal duty. The poster's reference to motherhood suggests that the responsibility for the nation's survival is passed to the family and emotional ties, and that involvement in war is both unavoidable and necessary. The poster is not about soldiers on the battlefield, but about civilians (especially women and children); it broadens the notion of war to encompass the entire population. This one works much better at making the war propaganda feel personal and emotional rather than a state directive. Propaganda represented the sacrifice of soldiers in war and praised the power of the country.[16] The poster is a significant historical document of emotional and social manipulation in wartime and was used to normalise conflict and embed the state's ideology into everyday life.

Germany used posters to spread its anti-Bolshevik message by invoking fear and demonising Bolshevism. The text at the top of the poster, translated into English as shown in the picture (Figure 11), reads: "Bolshevism brings war, unemployment, and hunger," directly linking Bolshevism with social chaos, economic collapse, and violence. The poster, which was rather blunt in its message, portrays Bolshevism as an existential danger to daily life and national security. The poster issues a call to action, stating "Association for the Struggle Against Bolshevism" with a Berlin address at the bottom. This turns fear into mobilisation and causes viewers not only to reject Bolshevism on an ideological level but also to actively aid the organised opposition to Bolshevism. Bolshevism is depicted as a dark, threatening figure that seems to be advancing and dominating the scene. The distorted shape, the heavy shadows and the exaggeration of the body suggest brutality and inhumanity. But it is also Bolshevism as a face of violence and a monster that rules over the composition, a symbol of oppression and terror. As a whole, the text and images were a coherent piece of propaganda aimed at mobilising public opinion, justifying the repression of political opponents, and cementing ideological unity by casting Bolshevism as an existential threat to the nation.

[15] Kathleen G. Chapman, *Expressionism and Poster Design in Germany, 1905–1922: Between Spirit and Commerce* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2018), 198.

[16] Maria Fernanda Rollo, Ana Paula Pires, and Noémia Malva Novais, eds., *War and Propaganda in the Twentieth Century* (Lisbon: IHC and CEIS20, 2013), 403.

The text is clearly a poster created by the official Nazi Party (NSDAP) to promote an anti-Bolshevik exhibition in Berlin. The title "Bolshevism unmasked" (Figure 12) implies an intention to 'expose' Bolshevism as a violent, destructive, and dangerous force, which bolsters the regime's ideology of communism as a secret danger to German society.

**Figure 11**: F. G. Sugelhard, *Bolschewismus* Propaganda Poster, (1937).
**Source**: Peter Paret, Beth Irwin Lewis, and Paul Paret, *Posters of War and Revolution from the Hoover Institution Archive* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 124.

**Figure 12**: Herbert Agricola, *Bolschewismus ohne Maske,* (1937).
**Source**: Peter Paret, Beth Irwin Lewis, and Paul Paret, *Posters of War and Revolution from the Hoover Institution Archive* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 131.

## Spain and the United States' Posters: The Visualisation of Ideological Conflict

During the interwar period, the division into opposing ideological camps had a profound global impact, and Spain emerged as one of the clearest examples of this polarisation. This polarisation is clearly reflected in contemporary posters. Just as Hitler and communism were depicted as symbols of terror in visual propaganda, General Franco was also represented as a figure of fear, embodying authoritarian repression and violence in Spanish poster imagery. Produced by the artists'syndicate within the socialist trade union, *Unión*

*General de Trabajadores* (UGT), this poster (Figure 13) caricatures General Franco, who had assumed leadership of the nationalist forces. Franco, whose malevolence is symbolised by death's head and the swastika on his chest, is a stiff, two-dimensional, cardboard puppet that serves as a front for the figures representing the military, capitalism, and clergy who gleefully carry his coattails.

**Figure 13**: Pedrero, The Generalissimo (1937).
**Source**: University of California San Diego Library, Special Collections, "Generalísimo Franco and the Spanish Civil War," accessed 7 March 2026, https://library.ucsd.edu/speccoll/visfront/generalismo.html.

**Figure 14**: X-Ray of Hitler's Brain (USA, 1942).
**Source**: Spartacus Educational. "Adolf Hitler." Accessed 26 June 2025. https://spartacus-educational.com/ExamHitler.htm.

The United States also criticised Nazism through posters, frequently using satire, ridicule, and visual exaggeration to undermine the authority and legitimacy of fascist ideology. This poster is a striking example of such criticism, employing mockery rather than heroic imagery to expose what it presents as the irrational and destructive nature of Nazi leadership. The title of the poster is "X-Ray Photo of Hitler's Brain" (Figure 14), which is very provocative, setting up the image as a diagnosis or revelation. The technique of "X-rays" seems to suggest the scientific objectivity of examining, exposing,

and understanding Nazism as a form of madness, not as a political ideology. The top of the image is entirely blank, and the caption "Insane" below the image is used to confirm this message by clearly stating that fascism is a pathological and dangerous entity. They add swastikas on either side of the word, which not only visually associate insanity with the Nazi ideology but also equate the ideology with insanity.

**Protest and Resistance: Anti-War Imagery**

Posters were not only tools of state propaganda but also of criticism of other ideological camps, and were very effective as a means of protest in individual societies. In wartime, there was a very great loss of life, and the painful emotions of war had a great impact on many artists and led them to react critically in their work. Käthe Kollwitz is a notable instance of this kind of art resistance. Kollwitz was born in Königsberg, Germany, in 1867 and used her art as a means of social and political commentary, dealing with the lives of women, the working class, and the harsh realities of war. Her anti-Nazi / anti-war images, frequently printed as posters, spoke of her grief, her mourning and her moral protest, rather than her glorification of violence and nationalism. Kollwitz was deeply touched by the plight and tragedy of human life, and her work vividly portrays the emotional and physical anguish during and after wars. Her work was very widely accepted in Germany and the rest of the West, but was firmly grounded in political ideals, consistently against militarism and authoritarianism.

Using Kollwitz's imagery, posters were not only tools of persuasion but also powerful statements of moral protest and humanitarian concern. This attitude is clearly expressed in works like *The Downtrodden* (Figure 15). The family is in distress, with the mother holding onto her dead child and the father covering his face in sorrow. The scene is depicted in a stark, monochromatic style, which gives it a timeless, universal feel, as if this suffering is not unique to any particular moment in history. Although The Downtrodden was neither reproduced by the Nazi regime nor included in the Degenerate Art exhibition, this universal characteristic is much of Kollwitz's oeuvre. Ironically, the same universal quality allowed the regime to detach her work from its original intent and selectively appropriate it for fascist purposes. Nevertheless, such images endure as historical evidence of artistic resistance to war and Nazism.

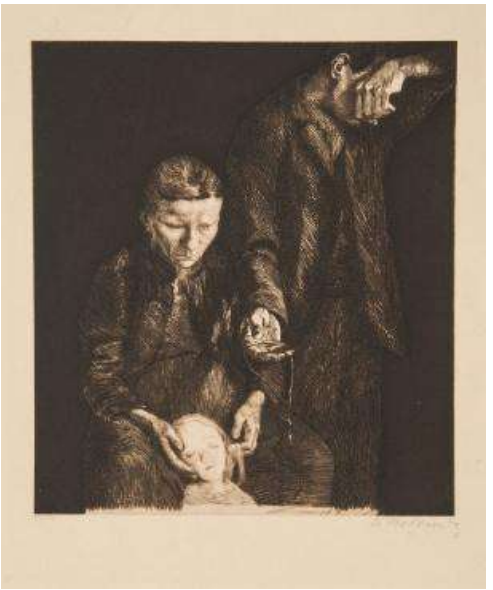

**Figure 15**: The Downtrodden, (1900).
**Source**: National Museum of Women in the Arts, "The Art of Contradiction: Nazi Reception of Käthe Kollwitz," accessed 17 February 2026, https://nmwa.org/blog/artist-spotlight/the-art-of-contradiction-nazi-reception-of-kathe-kollwitz/.

**Figure 16**: Jill Sharkey, Mother Courage and Her Children Poster (1980).
**Source**: Jill Sharkey, "Mother Courage and Her Children Poster" (1980), *Playbill and Promotion*, Providence College DigitalCommons, accessed 15 February 2026, https://digitalcommons.providence.edu/courage_pubs/1.

Hamilton King, one of the leading figures in American poster design, argued that a poster must capture attention instantly. In his view, a successful poster seizes a moment and conveys its message through a bold and decisive use of line and colour. Rather than functioning as a detailed portrait or careful study, a poster should create a quick visual impression—something that communicates a story in just a brief glance. For King, effective poster design combined drama and imagination while still presenting its message with clarity and sincerity.[17] Posters are also cultural artefacts that reflect politics and society. In the poster (Figure 16) for Bertolt Brecht's play Mother Courage and

[17] Charles Matlack Price and George W. Bricka, *Posters: A Critical Study of the Development of Poster Design in Continental Europe, England and America* (New York: George W. Bricka, 1913), 4.

Her Children[18], we see the pain of War through the mother's eyes. The play explores themes of war, capitalism, and the human cost of conflict, using Mother Courage's experiences to critique the destructive nature of war and the exploitation inherent in capitalist systems. The play is set in 17th-century Europe during the Thirty Years' War. But the play always reminds us of the devastating experience of war.

This article has illustrated the use of posters as key evidence for the interwar period and its political, social, and ideological context. Through an analysis of visual language and symbolism, it has been shown how states projected power, constructed political identities, and facilitated the rise of dictatorial regimes with the active participation of the masses. The posters were essential in mobilising, influencing public opinion, and naturalising authoritarian ideologies. The study has also revealed the dual aspects of posters. They were useful instruments of propagandising the state and mobilising the masses, but they were also powerful instruments of protest and humanitarian criticism. The posters were clearly not just pieces of paper; they were living visuals that shaped and reflected social realities. This article highlights the importance of posters as a means of political communication, cultural expression and social change during the interwar years by exploring their characteristics, functions and history.

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[18] Bertolt Brecht wrote *Mother Courage and Her Children* (*Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder*) in 1939.

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# Sunder Nursery: A Look at Garden Spaces as Urban Heritage

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*Gardens throughout Indian history have been conceptualised as a 'space' to express the relationship between human and nature, articulating the cultural responses of the people and uniting the relationship between space and time. As spaces for celebrating nature and life, gardens wove their way into landscapes, imparting diverse secular and sacred meanings. Therefore, gardens are an invaluable part of our heritage, both in their tangible and intangible aspects. However, they are also extremely vulnerable, often the first to suffer destruction from urban development. This paper aims to re-examine the changing social and cultural contexts of gardens as heritage spaces and how their meanings and use have been altered over time, thereby enhancing their contemporary relevance for stakeholders. It will examine the relationship between the garden as part of urban heritage and the site's socio-cultural factors, responding to the changing meanings and symbolism imbued in the site to address current needs and demands. The study will be based on Sunder Nursery, built in the sixteenth century, and currently, adjacent to the World Heritage Site Humayun's Tomb. This paper will shed light on this changing perspective of 'space' and its utility within urban heritage settings, drawing upon methods of public archaeology and ethnographic studies to examine how a heritage space could be imagined for contemporary purposes. For this research survey, archival documents such as archaeological and conservation reports, old photographs, and drawings serve as primary sources, along with an ethnographic study of how the community has perceived this place and its relationship to this space.*

**Keywords:** Sunder Nursery, Heritage, Public Archaeology, Urban renewal.

## Introduction

Gardens throughout history have been conceptualised as spaces to express the relationship between humans and nature, articulating people's cultural responses and uniting space and time.[1] As spaces for celebrating nature and

**Acknowledgements:** I would like to dedicate this article to Md Shaheer, a landscape architect who was the mastermind behind this conservation project at Sunder Nursery. I had minimal opportunity to interact with him, but beyond his expertise, I will never forget his personality.

life, gardens wove their way into landscapes, imparting diverse secular and sacred meanings.[2] Therefore, gardens are an invaluable part of our heritage, both in tangible and intangible ways. However, they are also the most vulnerable, often the first to suffer destruction due to urban development.[3]

The focus on communities and landscapes, especially heritage sites, is a relatively new development in India.[4] There is a significant gap between the authorised professional and institutional views of heritage landscapes, and the communities that claim them.[5] This tension is especially visible when sites like Sunder Nursery are defined by the agencies that control, maintain, and bestow new meanings upon them. This paper aims to build links between structures, landscapes, and communities. It will do so by exploring how communities relate to this site and acknowledge them as part of their identity. It will also attempt to examine shifting perceptions of space and functionality in urban heritage environments. Drawing on methods from public archaeology and ethnography, it will examine how heritage spaces can be reimagined for current use. The paper will draw on archival materials—such as archaeological and conservation records, period photographs, and site drawings—as principal sources. An ethnographic inquiry will also assess how the community interprets and interacts with the site.

This study will be based on Sunder Nursery, a complex built in the sixteenth century and adjacent to the World Heritage Site Humayun's Tomb. During the Mughal period, it was known as Azim Bagh and was situated on the Grand Trunk Road, the route which led to the famous caravanserai Azimganj. During the colonial period, this space was used as a site for horticultural

[1] Denis Cosgrove, "Geography Is Everywhere: Culture and Symbolism in Human Landscapes," in *Horizons in Human Geography*, ed. Derek Gregory and Rex Walford (London: Macmillan Education, 1989): 118-135.

[2] Ibid. 121.

[3] Brian Graham, G. J. Ashworth, and J. E. Tunbridge, *A Geography of Heritage: Power, Culture and Economy* (London: Arnold, 2000).

[4] Aditi Sharma and Rawal Singh Aulakh, "Historic Urban Landscape Recommendation in Indian Heritage Management Policies," *The Historic Environment: Policy & Practice* 14, no. 4 (2023): 428–443, https://doi.org/10.1080/17567505.2023.2275910.

[5] David Atkinson and Denis Cosgrove, "Urban Rhetoric and Embodied Identities: City, Nation and Empire at the Vittorio Emanuele II Monument in Rome," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 88, no. 1 (1998): 28–49.

experimentation and was named after the only remaining structure, Sunderwala Burj.[6] After Independence, it functioned as the office of the Horticulture Department of the Government of India, neglecting its original setup and composition.[7] In 2007, Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) and the Central Public Works Department, Government of India (CPWD) jointly initiated a restoration project to create a significant landscape, drawing inspiration from the traditional Indian concept of congruence between nature, garden and utility, coupled with archaeological and environmental conservation.[8]

The primary focus of this paper is to highlight landscape as an archive of changing historical narrative, unfolding the history of the space. In this paper, an attempt has been made to situate the historical narrative in the realm of contemporary urban heritage. The discussion will be based on the use of landscapes and monuments, using Sunder Nursery as a case study, and placing it within contemporary urban planning. This paper addresses these issues through a 'single inspection method'; it does not compartmentalise landscape archaeology, structural conservation, and urban planning into different disciplines. Nonetheless, while discussing the historical landscape—which combines both structural and natural components—each has a distinctive method and theoretical approach.[9]

There is a significant disjuncture between the authorised professional and institutional understandings of heritage landscapes and the communities claiming them.[10] These disconnections between the structure and the communities are expressed in their sense of belonging and in their meaning-making about heritage interpretation and the garden as a heritage space. But this paper combines these frameworks to analyse the issue. It attempts to examine the ontological aspects of monuments and how they create different meanings for their stakeholders and create a distinctive identity.[11]

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[6] Lucy Peck, *Delhi: A Thousand Years of Building* (New Delhi: Roli Books, 2005).

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ratish Nanda and M. Shaheer, *Sunder Nursery and Conservation in the Public Domain from July 2014* (New Delhi: Aga Khan Trust for Culture, 2014).

[9] Kim Dovey, *Framing Places: Mediating Power in Built Form* (London: Routledge, 1999).

[10] Dovey, *Framing Places*, 8.

[11] Alfredo González-Ruibal, "Archaeology of the Contemporary Past," in *Encyclopedia of Global Archaeology*, ed. Claire Smith (New York: Springer, 2014): 1683-94.

An increasing challenge in developing countries is balancing the conservation of heritage spaces with rapid urbanisation.[12] Due to urban development, heritage landscapes are at the highest risk of destruction. This asynchronous development plan has been treated as an isolated entity instead of being an integral part of the contemporary urban fabric.[13] In response to contemporary commercial development, heritage resources have been identified as a potential sustainable development sector and, as part of a large-scale urban planning and economic investment scheme, for the conservation of heritage structures and spaces, thereby creating an interface between heritage and community engagement. This dimension has been an essential part of recent studies pertaining to heritage interpretation, as heritage structures and spaces have always been associated with urban centres as markers of the modern city's identity.[14]

## Historiographical Background

Gardens have long been idealised as settings to celebrate nature and life. This conception connects them to the landscape, both urban and rural, and influences the secular and sacred meanings associated with it. Mystics interpret gardens as manifestations of divine love, while spiritual traditions regard them as realms for spiritual exploration.[15] Gardens have also served as venues for personal recreation and enjoyment. In contemporary contexts, they are seen as ecological systems essential for sustainable progress.[16]

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[12] Delhi Development Authority, *Master Plan for Delhi 2021* (New Delhi: Delhi Development Authority, 2007), accessed 29 June 2026, https://dda.gov.in/sites/default/files/inline-files/Master_Plan_for_Delhi_2021_text_report.pdf.

[13] Graeme Evans, 'Creative Cities, Creative Spaces and Urban Policy,' *Urban Studies* 46, nos. 5–6 (2009): 1003–40.

[14] Sarah Tarlow, 'The Archaeology of Emotion and Affect,' in *Annual Review of Anthropology* 41 (2012): 169–85.

[15] Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Garden of Truth: The Vision and Promise of Sufism, Islam's Mystical Tradition* (New York: Harper One, 2008).

[16] Mahesh Rangarajan, *Nature and Nation: Essays on Environmental History* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2015): 8.

Most medieval cities included gardens or open spaces alongside historic monuments and structures.[17] These features form the core of the city's original architectural scheme. Throughout history, examples abound of gardens as fundamental to the cultural practices of urban dwellers.[18] Modern scholarship views gardens as intersections of history and culture, representing a blend of landscape and archaeological significance.[19] The interaction between nature and human expression has long captivated scholars. In Indian cultural tradition, gardens have been interpreted as reflections of people, society, and their cultural settings.[20] Consequently, gardens consistently resonate with distinctive themes, illustrating their connections to the environment, cultural values, social customs, and varied modes of expression.[21]

All these and other architectural representations imbue a garden with many meanings when it is designed or laid out, and deliver mixed messages to daily life.[22] Thus, gardens as urban spaces have added a rich heritage that explains the interaction between humans and nature. Therefore, it is not just the landscape that defines a garden; it is its connection to history. This relationship gives the landscape a particular nomenclature as a historic garden.[23] It integrates the built heritage and heritage landscape into the contemporary urban development plan.[24] Thus, the concurrent use of heritage structures and garden spaces supports sustainable urban development.

As a historical city, the introduction of garden-scapes in Delhi developed over time. The archaeological evidence of human settlement in Delhi goes back to the Early Historic period. The specific characters of those settlements were not

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[17] Taha Baqir al-Janabi, "Islamic Archaeology in Iraq: Recent Excavations at Samarra," *World Archaeology* 14, no. 3 (1983): 305–27.

[18] Ebba Koch, "The Zahara Bagh (Bagh-i Jahanara) at Agra," *Environmental Design* 2 (1986): 3–37.

[19] J. M. Rogers, "Samarra: A Study of Medieval Town Planning," in *The Islamic City: A Colloquium*, ed. A. H. Hourani and S. M. Stern (Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, 1970): 119-155.

[20] Rangarajan, *Nature and Nation*, 10.

[21] Ali Daud and Emma J. Flatt, eds., *Garden and Landscape Practices in Precolonial India: Histories from the Deccan* (New Delhi: Routledge India, 2015).

[22] Patrick Bowe, "The Indian Gardening Tradition and the Sajjan Niwas, Udaipur," *Garden History* 27, no. 2 (1999): 189–205.

[23] Attilio Petruccioli, "Rethinking the Islamic Garden," *Yale F&ES Bulletin* 103 (2001): 349–64.

[24] Peter J. Larkham, *Conservation and the City* (London: Routledge, 1996).

fully investigated. But Delhi is known for its medieval Islamic heritage encompassing the dynastic histories of the Sultanate and Mughals.[25] Each of these monuments carries specific artistic and architectural features, particular to a respective period of history. The city is dotted with Islamic monuments, religious shrines like *dargah* (mausoleum of a Sufi saint), *maqbara* (mausoleum that does not function as a pilgrimage site) and *chillah* (place of a forty-day meditation), and gardens, which exemplify an inclusive approach to monuments and community.[26] Since the city is undergoing massive urban development/renewal, one should consider how heritage can be reinterpreted with new meanings and purposes.[27] Specifically, to promote Delhi as a heritage city transcending its status as a national capital and a centre for political activity, a case study of Sunder Nursery has been conducted to present a combined narrative of history and community engagement with heritage structures and landscape design.

Babur introduced the Mughal Garden in the Indian subcontinent as a specific landscape category with an architectural component.[28] This new initiative of urban decoration was further developed under the later Mughal emperors. It was not limited to introducing gardens in the major cities; even the provincial governors played a pivotal role in introducing gardens in their respective regions.[29] These architectural examples evoke a typical spatial assemblage– a square-shaped enclosure symmetrically divided into small squares, elevated walkways crisscrossing the enclosure diagonally, with the presence of water fountains. The entire arrangement represents the heavenly space, or paradise, mentioned in Islamic scriptures. The idea of paradise gardens symbolises a

[25] Ashirwadi Lal Srivastava, *The Sultanate of Delhi* (Agra: Shivlal Agarwala & Co., 1998): 21.

[26] R. S. Sethi, *Forgotten Delhi: From a Heritage Walker's Diary* (New Delhi: Roli Books, 2013).

[27] Sunil Kumar, *The Present in Delhi's Pasts*. 2nd ed. (New Delhi: Three Essays Collective, 2010).

[28] Catherine B. Asher, *Architecture of Mughal India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992): 5.

[29] Irfan Habib, *Medieval India: The Study of a Civilization* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 2008): 22.

resting place for the departed soul awaiting the last judgement, an essential part of the Islamic concept of heaven.[30]

After the disintegration of centralised Mughal power, the regional rulers started to significantly contribute to landscape design.[31] The regional governors and important nobles were the chief patrons of this activity.[32] Besides the central area of interest in Kashmir, places along the Grand Trunk Road were favoured sites for the construction of new avenues of leisure and entertainment. Gardens weren't an essential component of an Islamic township. The primary purpose was to accommodate the busy trade network along the Grand Trunk Road.[33] Thus, a small settlement, imbued with scenic beauty and basic facilities, was developed. Some of them were just caravanserai or resting places on the way to trade or pilgrimage destinations.[34]

This landscape was not intended to combine nature and a human-made environment. Technically, there were differences: gardens were introduced for recreational purposes and adorned the tombs or *maqbaras* of prominent figures. Additionally, gardens were also introduced in caravanserais for a pleasant stay during the journey of traders, which played a significant role in developing urban dwellers' cultural and economic life.[35] Archaeological mapping shows that the main concentrations of these historic gardens are along the famous Grand Trunk Road.[36] The crucial aspect of Mughal gardens is a synergy between nature and other structural elements. Here, architectural components were idealised with the elements of nature, creating harmony

[30] Jane I. Smith and Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, *The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[31] Daud and Flatt, *Garden and Landscape Practices in Precolonial India* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2015).

[32] Ibid.

[33] Jean Deloche and Raghubir Singh, *The Grand Trunk Road: A Passage Through India* (New Delhi: Roli Books, 1995).

[34] Hameeda Khatoon Naqvi, *Urban Centres and Industries in Upper India, 1556–1803* (London: Asia Publishing House, 1968).

[35] Elizabeth B. Moynihan, *The Moonlight Garden: New Discoveries at the Taj Mahal* (Washington, DC: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 2000).

[36] David Coll, *On the Grand Trunk Road: A Journey into South Asia* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2009).

between the two.[37] Today, these historic gardens play a significant role in historical discourse and form a valuable part of our broad concepts of heritage.

There are several theoretical perspectives on defining heritage, whether tangible or intangible. The most relevant differences between modernist and postmodernist perceptions of the word 'heritage' centre on time and the transformation of society. Since time is the primary marker of heritage, heritage as a nomenclature is perceived as a way in which the concept of time is essential to establishing its historicity. This Western interpretation defines time in terms of the past, present, and future, and goes on to explain the irreversible damage to build heritage and a strict preservationist approach to heritage conservation that treats it as an isolated entity. On the contrary, the concept of time as cyclical is integral to the non-Western way of perceiving heritage.[38] In this way, heritage has always been a part of human existence in the non-Western world.

This dichotomy between time and space has influenced how built heritage has been treated in urban planning and development.[39] Recent developments in heritage studies argue that the past should be used for a better understanding of the present.[40] In this regard, heritage has been defined as the contemporary use of the past to fulfil current requirements, such as domestic and international tourism. Urban development thus provides built heritage with a social role to promote the idea of heritage tourism.[41] Therefore, when we discuss heritage structures, it should not be limited to architectural monuments and their remains.[42] The landscape also plays an integral part in this composition. In short, gardening or designing a garden could be a leisure

[37] Moynihan, *The Moonlight Garden*.

[38] David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

[39] Miguel Martínez, 'The Citizen Participation of Urban Movements in Spatial Planning: A Comparison between Vigo and Porto' in *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 35, no. 1 (2011): 147–71.

[40] Romila Thapar, *Indian Cultures as Heritage: Contemporary Pasts* (New Delhi: Aleph, 2017): 12.

[41] Nick Merriman, *Public Archaeology* (London: Routledge, 2004).

[42] Hannah Jones, "Exploring Creative Possibilities of Awkward Space in the City," *Landscape and Urban Planning* 83, no. 1 (2007): 70–76.

activity for an individual.[43] However, when it connects with periods of history, the space is transformed from its humble origins to a tangible 'example' of history.[44] Therefore, in our literature and artistic expression, references to the garden are very frequent, as in some cases the garden has been idealised as an abode of the divine.[45]

## Concurrent discussions

As per the 2019 UNESCO Convention, a new urban agenda has been conceived to promote the preservation of historical heritage, focusing on architectural and natural variants.[46] This New Urban Agenda (NUA) recognises cultural heritage as essential for sustainable urban development. Many points highlight the role of cultural heritage (both tangible and intangible) in sustainable urban development.[47] Specifically, it highlights crucial scenarios where heritage is at risk, including historical sites, places affected by rapid urban development, and heritage structures targeted during political upheavals. Thus, the NUA expresses the inherent quality of heritage, rooted in space and time, and highlights the importance of cultural heritage; that it always maintains a sense of place, identity, and collective memory to avoid "the homogenising force of globalisation."[48]

Grete Swensen has argued along similar lines, citing four medium-sized Norwegian cities and towns that have experienced this large-scale urban renewal programme. Based on these case studies, she reflects on the inherent

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[43] Grete Swensen, "Integration of Historic Fabric in New Urban Development: A Norwegian Case Study," *Landscape and Urban Planning* 107, no. 4 (2012): 380–88.

[44] Andrea Hartz and Rainer Kestermann, "New Planning Concepts and Regional Cooperation: Responding to the Challenges of New Urban Landscapes," in *Planning Metropolitan Landscapes: Concepts, Demands, Approaches*, ed. Gunther Tress, Bärbel Tress, Bert Harms, Peter Smeets, and Arnold van der Valk (Wageningen: Wageningen University and Research Centre, 2004), 178–98.

[45] Ebba Koch, *The Complete Taj Mahal and the Riverfront Gardens of Agra* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2006).

[46] UNESCO, *Consolidated Report on the Implementation by the Member States of the 2011 Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape* (Paris: UNESCO, 2019), accessed 29 June 2026, https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000369043

[47] Ibid.

[48] Belinda Yuen, 'Reclaiming Cultural Heritage in Singapore' in *Urban Affairs Review* 41, no. 6 (2006): 830–54.

composition of cultural heritage, whether tangible or intangible, and argues that these have ''the potential to be a platform for developing the place-specific character of urban regions.''[49] She states that urban planning is based on an international context and 'glocal' images rather than the uniqueness of the specific towns, their fabric and environment.[50]

Therefore, monuments should not be understood as single markers of history. They reveal the subjective biases and prejudices that motivate monument selection in the preservation programmes.[51] The selective process by which the history of Delhi was canonised through its monuments is a continuous production of historical symbolism and the institutional regulation of cultural appropriation of the city.[52] In another way, monuments as a built form confer the dominant meaning of any particular space.[53] Therefore, interpreting monuments involves analysing the material properties of a specific space.[54] Thus, the monument's relevance represents a highly selective historical narrative that explicitly focuses on the events it embodies.[55] This creation of meaning for monuments depends on several factors and disciplinary approaches. Urban and art-historical approaches have explored monuments as aesthetic objects, specifying their historical, cultural, and artistic values.[56] Whereas human and cultural geography experts have explained monuments as political tools and how their symbolic representation addresses the dimensions of politics and development.[57]

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[49] Marcula Sepe ''The Characters of Place in Urban Design'' in *Urban Design International* 19, no. 3 (2014): 218.

[50] Swensen, "Integration of Historic Fabric," 381.

[51] David Harvey, "Monument and Myth," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 69, no. 3 (1979): 362–381.

[52] Y. D. Sharma, *Delhi and Its Neighbourhood* (New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1964).

[53] Alois Riegl, "The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin," trans. Kurt W. Forster and Diane Ghirardo, *Oppositions* 25 (1982).

[54] Ian Hay, Andrew Hughes, and Mark Tutton, "Monuments, Memory, and Marginalisation in Adelaide's Prince Henry Gardens," *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 86, no. 3 (2004): 201–216.

[55] Riegl, "The Modern Cult of Monuments," 24.

[56] Catherine B. Asher, "Architecture of Mughal India," 32.

[57] Derek Gregory, *Geographical Imaginations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

Therefore, this paper examines how these aspects of studying monuments overlap and reinforce one another, especially in meaning-making. This dialogic process, which conveys different meanings and shifting perspectives, addresses the interplay between users and the monument's actual designer.[58] Sociological and anthropological literature has mainly argued about these commemorative functions of monuments.[59] In this case, attention has been drawn to specific cultural patterns in users' commemoration; the monument represents a built form to commemorate events significant to a particular group or community, and space.[60] Alois Riegl has explained this dichotomy between the functional aspects of monuments and their actual relevance to the community, precisely the monument's traditional function. As a structure, "monument in its oldest and most original sense is a human creation, erected for the specific purpose of keeping single human deeds or events.... alive in the mind of future generations."[61]

Here, Riegl argues for the necessity to bear in mind a monument's connections with the past while conserving monuments. He states that monuments should be preserved, and necessary conservation measures should be taken in accordance with the monument's historical and cultural values.[62] In a similar vein, Roger Caves argues that preserving monuments depends on their historical and artistic values and commemorative functions. He explains how conservation of monuments is essential for the creation of meaning:

> A construction or an edifice filled with cultural, historical and artistic values. The conservation and maintenance of monuments are justified by those values. Historically, the monument's idea is closely tied to commemoration (of a victory, a ruling, or a new law). In the urban space, monuments have become part of the city's landscape, serving as spatial points of reference for elements that shape a place's identity.

[58] Martínez, "Citizen Participation of Urban Movements," 15.

[59] Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986): 2; Andrew M. Shanken, *The Everyday Life of Memorials* (New York: Zone Books, 2022): 10.

[60] Shanken, *The Everyday Life of Memorials*, 8; Riegl, "The Modern Cult of Monuments", 381.

[61] Riegl, "The Modern Cult of Monuments", 386.

[62] Ibid.

> Monuments can be enriched by educational and political functions [....] and artistic cones and those centred on commemoration.[63]

Therefore, while reviewing contemporary theories of monument interpretation, there is a distinct classification of approaches. One group suggests that meanings of monuments depend on the pertinent political situation, whereas interpretation depends on the prominence of the political elite.[64] So, it projects such an interpretation as "dominant culture", which has greater power to convey the monument's meaning and space.[65] The other group suggests that the monument is the most potent material cultural element, spontaneously acquiring every possible meaning beyond its initial or actual purpose.[66] In this case, ''alternative culture'' interprets monuments as "different or even contrary to the uses their builders or 'owners' intended to be put."[67] This approach fixes the circumstances in which different oppositional meanings "appropriate" monuments and "transform" them "into symbolic forms which take on new meaning and significance."[68] Consequently, there is a varied perception of monuments, as their officially sanctioned meanings can be challenged by other, contrasting meanings that they acquire over time.[69]

The metaphor "horizon of meanings" has been introduced to position monuments within the discourse of interpretation and representation.[70] Henri Lefebvre has described this interpretational appropriation as a monumental work, like a musical one, without a "signified", having several meanings: a specific or indefinite multiplicity of meaning. A shifting hierarchy in which now one, or another meaning comes momentarily to the fore, using – and for

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[63] Roger W. Caves, *Encyclopaedia of the City* (London: Routledge, 2005).

[64] Mike Rowlands and Christopher Tilley, "Monuments and Memorials," in *Handbook of Material Culture*, ed. Christopher Tilley et al. (London: Sage, 2006): 500–515.

[65] Cosgrove, "Geography Is Everywhere," 122.

[66] Brian S. Osborne, "Constructing Landscapes of Power: The George-Étienne Cartier Monument, Montreal," *Journal of Historical Geography* 24, no. 4 (1998): 431–58.

[67] Linda Hershkovitz, "Tiananmen Square and the Politics of Place," *Political Geography* 12, no. 5 (1993): 395–420.

[68] Denis Cosgrove and Peter Jackson, "New Directions in Cultural Geography," *Area* 19, no. 2 (1987): 95–101.

[69] Rowlands and Tilley "Monument and Memorials," 512.

[70] Ibid., 513.

the sake of – a particular action.[71] There has been a shift in the discourse on cultural, geographical and heritage studies since 1980 as new trends began to investigate landscapes as communicative devices that encode and transmit information.[72] Similarly, built heritage or monuments have been regarded as "high symbolic signifiers", which confer meaning on spaces as they are intertwined with them.[73]

## Sunder Nursery as a Case Study

Sunder Nursery was built in the sixteenth century in Delhi and was named Azimbagh, after the famous caravanserai Azimganj on the Grand Trunk Road. As an important trade route, rest houses and caravanserais were built at regular intervals for pilgrims, travellers, and traders along this medieval road.[74] It is situated next to the famous Sufi shrine of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya (d. 1325), which prompted the establishment of the caravanserai in this area. The 1860 photograph shows that an enclosure with a lofty gateway in the south surrounded these Mughal structures. However, the entire enclosure wall and the gateway had disappeared by the time the project was taken over. The first structure within this precinct is Sunderwala Burj (figure 5), a one-storied dome structure situated on a medium-height plinth. The structure's interior has floral patterns and Quranic verses in calligraphic style.[75] This complex has two other vital structures: the Sunderwala Mahal and the Bara Bateshewala (figure 2). In the far-left corner of the Bara Bateshewala, there is an unidentified structure with a similar architectural pattern to the Sunderwala Mahal.[76] The architectural plan of Sunderwala Mahal is identical to the Bara Batashewala. Sunderwala Mahal has four octagonal chambers at the four corners. From Sunderwala Mahal towards the east, a ruined mosque stands on a high plinth.

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[71] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

[72] James S. Duncan, *The City as Text: The Politics of Landscape Interpretation in the Kandyan Kingdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

[73] Yvonne Whelan, "The Construction and Destruction of a Colonial Landscape: Monuments to British Monarchs in Dublin before and after Independence," *Journal of Historical Geography* 28, no. 4 (2002): 508–33.

[74] Deloche and Singh, *The Grand Trunk Road*, 9.

[75] Gordon Risley Hearn, *The Seven Cities of Delhi* (London: Thacker, Spink & Co., 1906).

[76] Peck, *Delhi: A Thousand Years of Building*.

Though most of the mosque is now damaged, the mihrab is still visible. Just after, there is an enclosed late Mughal-period graveyard. From Sunderwala Burj towards the north, a similar structure, Lakkharwala Burj (Figure 5), is situated on a high plinth with a round dome. The names of these monuments were adopted much later and are today known by them. It is unknown who the patron of the Lakkharwala tomb was, as similar structures can be seen in this area – Nila Gumbad and Sabz Burz (Figure 3 and 4) are examples that stand without an identified patron. During the colonial period, the premises was used as a horticultural experimentation site and named as Sunder Nursery after the remaining structure, Sunderwala Burj.[77] The garden was used for horticultural experimentation and growing plants from different parts of the Empire starting in 1921. The garden was later used as a nursery for supplying saplings for the new capital city of British India.[78]

After Independence in 1947, the garden's purpose remained the same: it was used by the horticulture department of the Central Public Works Department (CPWD). The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) took over the maintenance of the monuments. However, since the structures were situated within the premises of the government horticulture department, public access to the place was restricted, and it was closed on Sundays and other public holidays.[79] Concerned authorities should have paid attention to its original setup and composition. However, it was ignored, and the structures gradually became abandoned monuments. Since 1999, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) held regular discussions with various authorities responsible for the monuments and the land. One of the monuments was under the protection of the Delhi State Archaeology Department.[80] In 2010, the Government of India initiated a collaborative project with the ASI, AKTC, and the CPWD.[81] The project's main objective was to redefine the spatial and cultural meaning of Humayun's Tomb and its surrounding areas.[82]

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[77] Sharma, *Delhi and Its Neighbourhood*, 112.

[78] Thomas R. Metcalf, *An Imperial Vision: Indian Architecture and Britain's Raj* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[79] Ratish Nanda and M. Shaheer, *Sunder Nursery and Conservation in the Public Domain from July 2014* (New Delhi: Aga Khan Trust for Culture, 2014).

[80] Ibid., 209.

[81] Ibid.

[82] Aga Khan Trust for Culture, *Sunder Nursery Master Plan* (New Delhi: Aga Khan Trust for Culture, 2007).

**Figure 1**: Remnant of a Mosque, an arched gateway
**Source**: Photo courtesy of the author

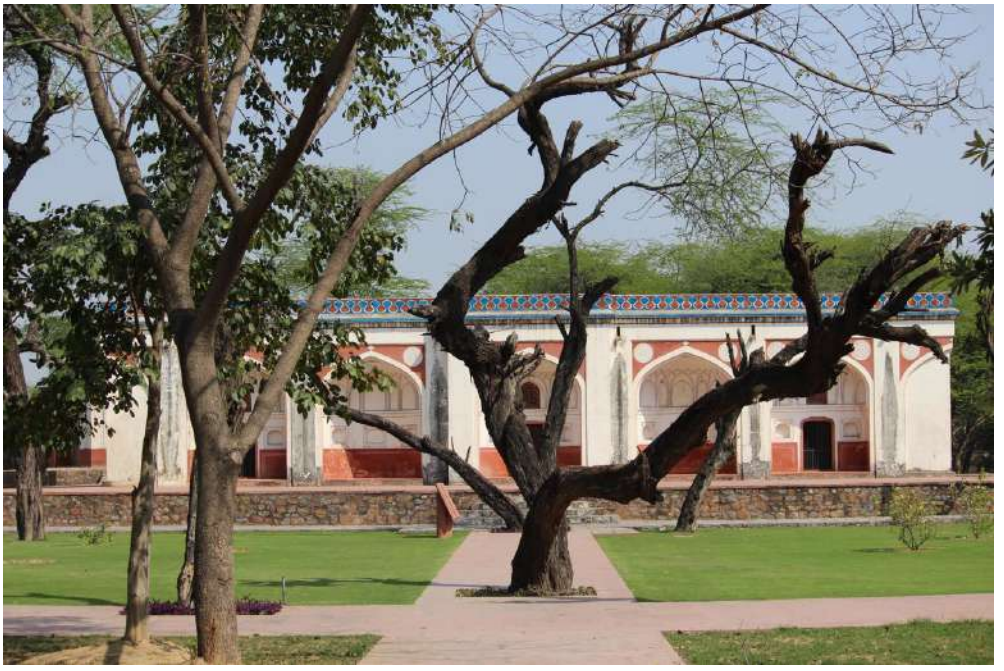

**Figure 2**: Arched façade of Bara Batashewala
**Source**: Photo courtesy of Yogesh Snehi

**Figure 3**: Sabz Burz viewed from the central lake
**Source**: Photo courtesy of the author

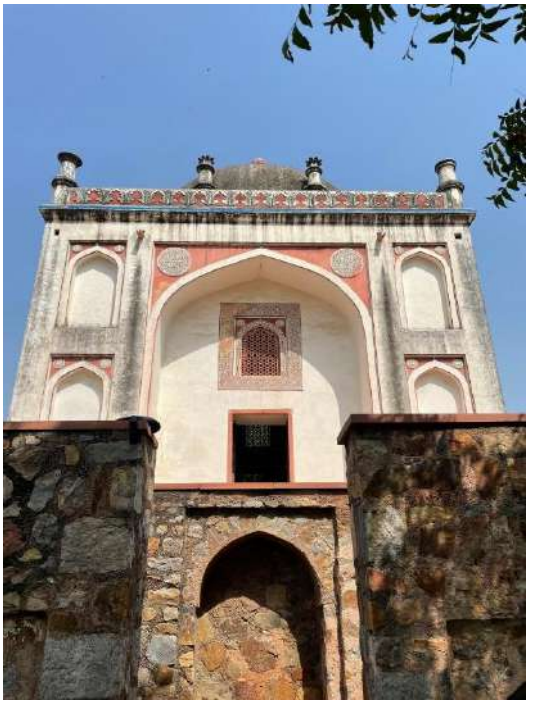

**Figure 4**: Front elevation of Sabz Burz
**Source**: Photo courtesy of Yogesh Snehi

**Figure 5**: Square elevation of Lakkarwala Burz
**Source**: Photo courtesy of the author

**Figure 6**: Illuminated Sunderwala Burz
**Source**: Photo courtesy of the author

Sunder Nursery was a part of a larger urban renewal scheme, the Nizamuddin Urban Renewal Initiative, also steered by the AKTC. Although there are other stakeholders in the project, one should emphasise here the role of the ASI and a few well-known corporate houses. The project's total area is approximately 90 acres. This project focuses not only on the structural conservation of the monument and garden, but also on community engagement and redevelopment in the surrounding Nizamuddin Basti area. It is part of a larger cultural and heritage interpretation programme for looking after 30 Mughal-era monuments and creating a city park, the first arboretum in Delhi.[83] This project raised pertinent questions about conservation ethics, including community participation and heritage interpretation. The debate centred on the use of materials and land; the prevailing view was that this was the first project to combine heritage preservation and urban landscaping, in which the entire composition of structure and land was reinterpreted. The AKTC has similar projects on Islamic gardens, such as Shalimar Garden in Lahore, Pakistan; Bagh-e Babur in Kabul, Afghanistan; and Khorog Park in Khorog, Tajikistan.

The Sunder Nursery project differed from the previous Islamic Garden projects undertaken by the AKTC. In this project, a significant question was how to engage the community beyond the casual visit to the site. This space has been used by the local community for a long time for family gatherings, celebrating family functions like birthdays, anniversaries and so on. Therefore, the project emphasised creating a community space that intended to cater to recreational activities, while also promoting arts and crafts produced by local craftsmen. This curated arrangement of bringing the community to archaeological sites aimed to combine monuments, landscape, and the community. It includes the contemporary usage of heritage gardens for urban renewal and development as an interactive experience between nature, humans, and structure.[84]

This project presents a broader perspective and context of the monument, garden, buildings, and space. It initiates ecological conservation model as part of natural and environmental heritage, an integral part of the historical monument and landscape. However, there were concerns about the land use

[83] Nanda and Shaheer, *Sunder Nursery and Conservation in the Public Domain*, 210.
[84] Ibid.

of Sunder Nursery and nearby areas for city planning.[85] Initially, the project was imagined around the structures of the Sunder Nursery, but later on, the surrounding areas and structures were also included. Therefore, while undertaking conservation and landscape work, the extended areas included the enclosed garden tomb of Mirza Muzaffar Hussain, who traced his lineage to Taimur and married the eldest daughter of the Mughal Emperor Akbar, as well as the Bateshewala Tomb complex. Encroachments around this structure were demolished through a judicial process.

The mandate was not merely the structural and preventive conservation of the monument alone, nor the making of an archaeological monument accessible to the public. The idea was to place a historical monument and use the historical landscape for a contemporary urban lifestyle. In the particular case of Sunder Nursery, the site was used for structural and environmental conservation. This project tied together aspects of cultural heritage, environmental conservation, and the socio-economic development of the neighbourhood within its expanded urban spatial context. This inclusive approach of altering the landscape and adding modern facilities for urban recreation, such as a craft market, a boutique restaurant, an amphitheatre for cultural events, and an ecological zone showcasing the city's natural heritage, adds a different dimension to heritage interpretation. The conservation process brought back old traditional methods and craftsmanship by using the materials used to construct the structures. Therefore, the conservation method was based on traditional materials and construction technology. Alongside site development work, the project also focused on reviving traditional craftsmanship.[86]

## Problem Areas

As heritage spaces, gardens tend to be quite vulnerable, as the land can be utilised or further developed for contemporary urban purposes, and is very often encroached upon by official authorities for new projects. The main challenge with any structural or landscape conservation projects are how to make it relevant for contemporary usage, making it more functionable beyond the structure and narrative associated with the structure and landscape.

[85] Ibid.

[86] Philip Jodidio, *The Aga Khan Historic Cities Programme* (Munich: Prestel, 2011).

Therefore, projects on landscape conservation are often considered a peripheral activity in comparison with large-scale monument conservation projects.[87] As it has been noticed that an abandoned heritage site or structure exists in completely changed social and cultural contexts; in some cases, their physical layouts are also modified.[88] It is not just a loss of context; in some cases, they lose their original meanings and messages, becoming anonymous green spaces.[89] This ambiguous perception of gardens and its landscapes makes the area more susceptible to illegal land use and unlawful activities, as it has been publicly understood as a non-significant, common open space.[90] Therefore, it is not a question limited to practitioners of heritage studies. It has a broad utility for addressing concerns within the realms of history, archaeology, and cultural geography.

Thus, the conservation of historic gardens is not only about protecting the site by imposing laws, building a fence, and installing a security system. It involves different disciplines of study and is, therefore, not limited to the protection of the site. It engages with a range of tasks and methods, including garden archaeology, excavation, and palaeobotanical studies, as well as physical geographies such as water bodies and ecosystems.[91] These aspects of preserving the landscape, including its structural components, fall within the scientific discipline of conservation and preservation.[92] However, one should extend beyond this scientific work. There is a broader perspective to bring into light, in which interpretation and its representation play a pivotal role in understanding different layers of these landscapes and their structures.[93]

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[87] Malcolm Miles and Ronan Paddison, "Introduction: The Rise of Culture-Led Urban Regeneration," *Urban Studies* 42, nos. 5–6 (2005): 833–39.

[88] Christopher K. Currie, *Garden Archaeology: A Handbook* (York: Council for British Archaeology, 2005).

[89] Aditi Sharma and Rawal Singh Aulakh "Historic Urban Landscape Recommendation in Indian Heritage Management Policies," 431.

[90] Christopher Tweed and Margaret Sutherland, "Built Heritage and Sustainable Urban Development," *Landscape and Urban Planning* 83, no. 1 (2007): 62–69.

[91] Robert Freestone and Chris Gibson, "The Cultural Dimension in Urban Planning Strategies: An Historical Perspective," in *Culture, Urbanism and Planning*, ed. J. Monclús and M. Guardia (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006): 21–43.

[92] David Kincaid, *Adapting Buildings for Changing Uses: Guidelines for Change of Use Refurbishment* (London: Spon Press, 2002).

[93] Ruth M. Van Dyke, "Archaeology and Social Memory," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 48 (2019): 207–25.

There should be a balance between the garden's significance and its changing meaning and symbolism.[94] It extends the scope further to inspect the reasonable manner in which the garden can respond to its current needs and demands. This inspection aims to establish the relevance of the past, its modern usage, and its requirements. However, the integration or authentication of the original historical fabric of gardens depends on design, layout, the materials used, techniques, location, setting, and most essentially, the spirit which is inherent in the garden.[95] Historic preservation is not merely concerned with preserving the past or the ancient, which has historical importance.[96] However, in urban planning, the idea is to look forward to how to use the past to inform the present. In other words, the broader idea of urban planning, particularly when concerned with historical cities and places, should be framed by the contemporary relevance of the historical past to their present dwellers.[97] Therefore, in practice, people usually consider them as two separate and opposing fields.

In the context of growing city networks, collaborating through different methods is necessary for maintaining a balance between the pace with which urban development is carried out, and preservation of the tangible historical past. As current developments in conservation science have begun to emphasise historicity, many people have realised that the myth of the discrepancy between historic preservation and urban planning is a problem involving two disciplinary fields. There has been considerable progress in the practice of integrating these two fields to establish a connection, and linkages, between the past, present, and future.

The issue of formulating a definition for the term 'community' itself has proven to be pressing, and quite urgent. The very first point comes into the discussion who forms the community, where to find them to interact and know about their connections with the space and the monument. The critical

[94] Currie, *Garden Archaeology*, 209.

[95] Ebba Koch, *Mughal Art and Imperial Ideology: Collected Essays* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[96] Currie, *Garden Archaeology*, 210.

[97] Gunther Tress, Bärbel Tress, Bert Harms, Peter Smeets, and Arnold van der Valk, eds., *Planning Metropolitan Landscapes: Concepts, Demands, Approaches* (Wageningen: Wageningen University and Research Centre, 2004).

part of this endeavour is how to convey them the idea of heritage, and their relationship with it. Explaining the synonym of heritage in Hindi is not enough to make them understand the theoretical frame of critical heritage and ethical conservation. These were the methodological questions that repeatedly arose during fieldwork. The other part of the question was how to make it easy to understand the multi-dimensional meaning of a monument beyond its structural components among the visitors. As there were several kinds of visitors like casual visitors, domestic and international tourists, and local visitors. They all come from different social and cultural backgrounds with diverse abilities to appreciate the structure and landscape.

Therefore, ethnographic research becomes difficult due to cultural factors surrounding who would be willing to participate in the questionnaire to document the opinions and thoughts, the main issue was whether only Muslim visitors, as they relate to the structure and landscape, were affected by their religious affiliation. Alternatively, there was thought to go to the foreign visitors, as presenting the idea of heritage will differ in both cases. Thus, the definition of a community becomes vague due to the place's touristic magnificence, which draws people from across the country and the world.

The interviews were conducted among domestic visitors to the monument, including some from the Muslim community, mainly from the Nizamuddin Basti area, which is a neighbouring area of Sunder Nursery and other predominantly Muslim areas of the city. Some of them have a cursory understanding of Delhi's history, specifically the Mughal period and its monuments. Some of them have graduated; some are educated in a traditional way. Alternatively, residents from Nizamuddin's eastern side whose places of residence were situated adjacent to the site, were regular, recreational users of the site under discussion. They were mostly educated, upper-middle-class people who were aware of the monument's historical context, specifically the dynastic history of Delhi. They were also the ones who engaged with the ideas of development, sustainability, and environmental issues. But the most critical question still needs to be answered: what is entailed by the transformation of a space, with a uniquely Islamic character, into a national heritage site and recreational space?

The answers were varied, as one group claimed their religious inheritance and asked for the removal of the ticket price, as their lives and identities were entwined with the monument and its space. The memory attached to the experience of heritage is inseparable in this case. Social memories get attached to spaces in various ways.[98] The other group has welcomed the conservation initiatives and has been favourable to the transformation of the space for multi-purpose usages. For them, the site got a new look, which definitely serves the purpose of entertainment and recreation. Alongside, it also provided a new meaning for the structures and the garden within its historical context. The site has undergone several changes over time in terms of its usage and purpose. The new conservation project altered the landscape's purpose again and sought to provide a secular identity within its historical frame. Therefore, the archaeology of the social memory of the space is a crucial part of understanding the changes that have made it a contemporary urban space. Inclusion of curated content, such as a guided heritage walk, a designated space for selling or organising a traditional crafts shop, a nature interpretation centre, and a nature trail, has transformed the physical and emotional experience of the space quite substantially.

## Conclusion

The creation of urban images and the renewal of urban landscapes is part of the global economy of the heritage landscape. The most critical challenge to this urban development is the implementation of the renewal plan, as well as the historical and archaeological significance of the structure and landscape. We need to understand the interplay between history, structure, and community, and how it shapes the culture of interpretation. It addresses various issues, such as the politics of heritage interpretation, changing the monument's meaning, and, of course, identity construction.

Therefore, archaeological remains, specifically monuments and structures, become the signifier for gazing at the city. Monuments play a central role in this experience of looking at the city. The idea of spectatorship represents perspectives on understanding the city within its historical and archaeological frames. It also dominates the contemporary culture of urban renewal or

[98] Van Dyke, "Archaeology and Social Memory," 207-225.

redesigning of historical landscapes.[99] That is why we cannot limit the act of seeing only within the perspectives of experts and scholars engaged with the discipline. In a way, we cannot generalise different ways of seeing archaeological sites, as the temporal context of seeing historical and archaeological sites splits along the diverse nature of spectatorship.[100] Cultural heritage management includes the historical fabric in the urban development and renewal programme.[101] It could develop 'place-specific' characteristics into the development project.

The Sunder Nursery conservation project is part of a larger initiative to examine Islamic heritage, including structures, landscape, and community.[102] It connects the textual and material execution of the conservation plan. Introducing new features and facilities into the historical landscape, it demonstrates how archaeological remains can be used in current urban design projects. Preservation of archaeological remains has been an age-old practice. However, providing them with a new context, purpose, and use is an innovative way to bring archaeological practice and methods to the public. It is a method that breaks disciplinary boundaries and provides scope for non-experts to engage with the practice. On closer inspection, we can see that historical and archaeological remains have been mainly used for local, regional, national or political rhetoric rather than presented as an essential element of sustainable urban development.[103]

The conservation project at the Sunder Nursery is the first example of implementing a broader perspective on conservation methods and public archaeology. It is more comprehensive than the monument's structural conservation, and it aids in developing the tourist industry as well. The premises were neglected and used for different purposes for a long period of

[99] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black & Red, 1972); Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*. 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[100] Gregory, *Geographical Imaginations*, 214

[101] Lilian Fessler Vaz and Paola Berenstein Jacques, "Contemporary Urban Spectacularisation," in *Culture, Urbanism and Planning*, ed. J. Monclús and M. Guardia (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006): 241–53.

[102] Aga Khan Trust for Culture, *Nizamuddin Urban Renewal Initiative: Annual Report 2019* (New Delhi: Aga Khan Trust for Culture, 2019).

[103] Miles and Paddison, "Introduction: The Rise of Culture-led Urban Regeneration," 3.

time. Therefore, there was a requirement to implement imagined landscape drawing which will fit with the historical context of the landscape and structure. There are plenty of references from texts present in the design of the Mughal Garden, the water fountains, and the arrangement of plants and other vegetation. So, with the help of textual references and the principles of landscape design it creates an experience for the visitors beyond the historical information about the monuments and landscape.

The aesthetic transformation affects the entire representation of an archaeological site, specifically when it is situated within a city. Changes are expected in the management of every city. The intrinsic part of urban development is sometimes haphazard, for instance the placement of a fifteenth century structure next to a contemporary building. In Delhi, we have more such examples. One of these happens to be the New Delhi Municipal Corporation building, which stands opposite the Jantar Mantar complex. Therefore, 'hybrid heritage cities' are a typical mix of any significant urban landscape. Therefore, the townscape's heterogeneity defines any city's cultural heritage. Moreover, it is a major challenge for cultural heritage management, as public acceptance of and resistance to any change or development are questioned.

Developing a new image for historical sites spectacularises archaeological remains in a surreal way. It creates a new social basis for structures and provides a more extensive understanding of the space beyond the monument and its historical background. We can see this heterogeneity in terms of townscape, demography, and economy in Sunder Nursery. Therefore, integrating new design and introducing new architectural components as part of the design into existing landscape was challenging, as the existing monuments reveal their histories and are closely tied to the surrounding areas. A monument as an architectural ideal always carries a notion of history. Therefore, when the changes are done, they should remain in their original historical and archaeological context.

Therefore, adding a miniscule version of Mughal Garden has provided the notion of history in which these monuments were lost for some time. Although, in actual plan there was no systematic evidence of a garden, a buried water reservoir was discovered while clearing dumped garbage and was developed as a lotus pond. So, it is not only about laying out a garden; it

also accommodates other elements, such as flora and fauna specimens and the region's natural habitats. It is not copying the idea of an Islamic garden from textual sources; rather, it infuses those ideas into contemporary landscape design projects. It brings the community to participate and to actively engage with the landscape and the facilities provided. The purpose of conservation and landscape design is not limited to the aesthetic development of the space. It has a more significant economic connotation: an abandoned site with dilapidated archaeological remains becomes part of that global heritage economy.

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# Colonial Policies and Vernacular Education in Nineteenth Century Moradabad: A Historical Study

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*This article examines the entanglement of administration and vernacular education in Moradabad under British rule. Even though nineteenth-century North India has been extensively discussed within scholarship, historians have not paid sufficient attention to the processes through which, by the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the British Company gradually developed its bureaucracy in the North-Western Provinces by institutionalising colonial education, even within village schools in Moradabad. This article argues that, through the joint efforts of the British Company and Christian missionaries, regional education in Moradabad was significantly shaped, and it also analyses the character of British bureaucratic patronage in the promotion of 'scientific education.' Despite social and political differences, Moradabad maintained its own unique way of building and strengthening ties. It also alludes to the contentious disputes that took place in Moradabad during the colonial era between families, social, and religious groups about the character of vernacular education. This essay, therefore, addresses the wider societal importance of vernacular educational systems and looks at their increasing popularity. It does so by studying Sayyid Ahmad Khan Madrassa's institutional impact and historical evolution, paying attention to the transformations brought about in Muslim intellectual culture and educational practices in Moradabad.*

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**Keywords:** British, *Halkabandi*, Madrassa, Tehsil, Urdu

## Introduction

Moradabad was a district formerly within the province of the western portion of Rohilkhand. It had several parganas, including Kashipur, Rudrapur, Thakurdwara, Reher, Najibabad, Seercote, Afzulghar, Surkurrah, and the northern parts of Nagina, significant regions that were under colonial rule.[1] The region was originally under the control of the Rohillas, but after the Rohilla War of 1744, it came under Shuja-ud-Daulah, the Nawab of Awadh.

[1] Walter Hamilton, *The East India Gazetteer.* vol. II. (London: 1935), 245-247. Abdul Aziz Khan Ansi, *Tarikh-i-Rohilkhand.* (Karachi: Matba Uloom-o-Fiqar, 1963), 17-25.

Later, in 1801, the Nawab transferred it to the British East India Company. While the people of Rohilkhand had enjoyed prosperity under Rohilla rule, they faced severe hardships under the Awadh rulers.[2] When the East India Company took over the administration, their difficulties only intensified.

The difficulties posed by the growing power of the colonial state in Moradabad were comparable to what many societies in northern India confronted at some point in the nineteenth century. Previously, no single agency was seen to have exclusive authority over judgements on the nature of knowledge, and the methods best suited for its transmission. With support for a range of educational institutions and systems, political coexistence and tolerance among them, and a rhetorical presumption of the legitimacy of diverse learning methods, Moradabad became the epitome of heterogeneity. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, Moradabad, which emerged as a hub for industry, also documented advancements in education. Indigenous educational institutions, including madrassa schools, *halkabandi,* zila, and tehsil, were important in this area. Thus, this study raises questions regarding the sluggishness of educational advancement during the early years of British rule. Why, in contrast to vernacular educational institutions which were highly favoured by society, British English schools were unable to catch up to them?

Rashid Ahmad Khan argues in his works that Sayyid Ahmad Khan believed that the solution to every problem facing the Muslim society of northern-India, from the nineteenth century onwards, was found in contemporary western education. It was difficult to convince them to embrace this viewpoint, though, as Muslims, they took great pride in their traditional educational heritage and were wary of its English counterpart. Despite strong opposition, Sayyid Ahmad Khan maintained that Muslim society could not advance in the absence of Islamic education, combined with the knowledge of the Western arts and sciences.[3] To encourage scientific education, Sayyid Ahmad Khan established a madrassa in Moradabad, while also serving as a judge in 1858. However, there are some reservations about Sayyid Ahmad Khan's

[2] Khuda Dad Khan, *Tarikh-i-Rohilkhand Moradabad.* (Rampur: Murtaza Press, 1949), 33-45.

[3] Abdul Rashid Khan, *The All India Muslim Educational Conference: Its Contribution to the Cultural Development of Indian Muslim 1886-1947.* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2001), x.

educational reforms in Moradabad. It started with the question as to why Sayyid Ahmad Khan's educational reform was restricted to the education of the 'elite community' in a patriarchal society.

## Historiography

Existing historiography on Rampur and Amroha emphasises educational progress of these cities, depicting Moradabad as a renowned *qasba* with a developing centre of indigenous and vernacular education in the North-Western Province. M. Raisur Rahman worked on the *qasba* culture of the North-Western Provinces and underlines historical development of the Amroha region of Moradabad. In this respect, he mentions that the linkages between *qasbas* (towns) and a range of educational, literary, and public institutions fostered a supportive and attractive milieu that encouraged town populations to return to their places of origin. This pattern stands for the popularisation and patronisation of village and vernacular education systems.[4] However, Rahman's study neglects emphasis on the significance of local educational institutions that relied on vernacular languages, such as zila (district schools), tehsil, and *halkabandi* schools, etc., even though these schools had more students than those attending schools supported by the British Government. These vernacular schools were highly popular at the basic level of schooling because they used regional languages such as Urdu, Hindi, Persian, etc. as their medium of instruction. Even Lord Macaulay (1800-1859) argued that Indian education was very vernacular, and the medium of instruction was Urdu and Persian, as well as native languages.[5]

Regarding Muslim culture and Islamic education in Amroha, Justin Jones has studied Muslim reformation and argues that when Western education encounters 'Muslim culture,' Islamic and 'syncretic' cultural and learning

[4] M. Raisur Rahman, *Locale, Everyday Islam, and Modernity: Qasbah Towns and Muslim Life in Colonial India.* (New Delhi: Oxford University, 2015), 150-156; M. Raisur Rahman, "Qaṣbas as Place: A Sense of Belonging and Nostalgia in Colonial India," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient,* 2015, vol. 58, No. 5, 668-692; M. Raisur Rahman, "The Partition Conundrum: Perspective, Experience and Ambiguities from qasbahs of India," in *Muslim Against the Muslim League: Critiques of the Idea of Pakistan,* eds. Ali Usman Qasmi and Megan Eaton Robb. (Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 65-81.

[5] Macaulay's Minute on Education, Foreign and Political Department, File No. M-1/001385, National Archive of India, New Delhi (henceforth NIA), date 1835, 2-5.

practices were affected. Many Sayyid households in Amroha exhibited little interest in state-sponsored education, which probably stems from these existing resentments. They chose to attend recently founded religious schools, instead of government ones, which benefited from substantial community support and endowments. These establishments could provide instruction at no cost, in contrast to public schools. Consequently, many impoverished aristocratic families in Amroha decided to send their boys to the growing, seemingly flourishing system of Arabic schools.[6] Colonial authority made concerted, but mostly unsuccessful, attempts at encouraging educational reform among the Sayyids because it saw them as a community in need of special assistance. To promote Western education among well-established Muslim households, Shia institutions such as *Sayyid-ul-Madaris* and *Imamul-Madaris* were urged to implement rudimentary English training. On the other hand, Amroha was chosen for conducting an examination of the extent of Islamic education among Muslim pupils in government schools, which deviated from the usual educational framework and convinced a small number of families to take part. In general, Sayyids' preferences were not changed by these efforts. As evidenced by the establishment of the *Anjuman-i-Sadat-i-Amroha* in 1910, a majority of them remained dedicated to religious education, as opposed to many Sunni Shaikh and Pathan families who continued to prefer the Aligarh College.[7] Soheb Niazi, who studies *ashraf* culture of Amroha, an important town of Moradabad, remarks that the elite and 'Sayyid' Muslims of the town had developed their own mohalla, and maintained their *maktab* and madrassas for Quranic education.[8]

Razak Khan, in his research on the princely state of Rampur during the colonial era, points out that state-funded, as well as locally funded *maktabs* and madrassas, were operational in nineteenth-century Rampur. He also states that the Rampur state showed a consistent interest in the development of education by establishing a prestigious institution called *Madarsa-i-'Aliya.* Khan asserts that the importance of *Madarsa-i-'Aliya* in Rampur was similar to that of the prestigious Islamic educational centres of Deoband, Firangi Mahal,

[6] Justin Jones, "The Local Experiences of Reformist Islam in a 'Muslim' Town in Colonial India: The Case of Amroha," *Modern Asian Studies,* 43, 4 (2009), 871–908.

[7] Ibid, 893.

[8] Soheb Niazi, "Sayyids and Social Stratification of Muslims in Colonial India," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society,* Vol. 30, No. 3 (July 2020), 467-487.

and the *Madarsa-i-Nizamiyya* of Delhi, which highlights the madrassa's importance in the region.[9] The State of Rampur's educational establishments were founded and funded by the princely state's reigning ruling class. The case of Moradabad, however, was different because it was not governed by a similar ruling class nor a princely kingdom. The Moradabad region's local vernacular schools proliferated and gained popularity in large part due to this structural variance. Both works fail to underline the significance of vernacular or indigenous schools in Amroha. It was just a tehsil under Moradabad district.

About Urdu and vernacular education, Gail Minault contends that the establishment of Delhi College in 1820 was an important turning point in North India. She claims that two significant modifications resulted from this development. First, Delhi College started using English as a medium of instruction for modern education. Second, during this same time frame, Urdu saw significant expansion and became a literary and educational language.[10] Additionally, in her other work *Secluded Scholars*,[11] Minault argues that Urdu was crucial for creating and solidifying a 'sharif' ethos in Muslim society in North India. At the same time, classical languages like Sanskrit, Arabic, and Persian were still emphasised in the Oriental curriculum that was referred to, connected to vernacular education. In order to maintain established educational structures, the literature of these languages was a major component of the curricula in madrasas and schools,[12] but the examples regarding Moradabad demonstrate a slightly different image. According to British educational reports and documents pertaining to the Sayyid Ahmad Khan's madrassa in Moradabad, Urdu was taught as a subject in both vernacular schools and madrassas during the nineteenth century. This implies that, rather than merely reflecting a change from one system to another, conventional and new linguistic patterns coexisted. Furthermore, Minault also

[9] Razak Khan, *Minority Pasts: Locality, Emotions, and Belonging in Princely Rampur.* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2022), 92-93.

[10] Gail Minault, *Gender, Language, and Learning: Essays in Indo-Muslim Cultural History.* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2009), 165-166; Gail Minault, "Sayyid Mumtaz Ali and 'Huquq un-Niswan': An Advocate of Women's Rights in Islam in the Late Nineteenth Century," *Modern Asian Studies,* Vol. 24, No. 1 (Feb., 1990), 147-172

[11] Gail Minault, *Secluded Scholars: Women's Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India.* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 164-170; and 220-260.

[12] Minault, *Secluded Scholars,* 220-260.

asserted that Urdu, which was accorded the status of a vernacular language, became a new medium for the transmission of education. The college also emerged as a symbol of Oriental learning in nineteenth-century North India.[13]

## British Policies and Vernacular Education

The Moradabad district continued to lag behind in terms of education throughout the initial years of British rule. Children from upper classes learned just the basics of Hindi, Urdu, or Persian in the early years of British rule, as educational opportunities were restricted to institutions of a wholly indigenous nature.[14] These schools, for the most part, were short-lived and ineffective. For instance, the Arabic school affixed to a mosque in Amroha, a town long recognised as a centre of learning, was one noteworthy exception.[15] According to an official investigation of the condition of vernacular education conducted in 1846–1847, there were 329 schools in the district, with 2,837 students enrolled. Tehsil schools were founded at Moradabad, Amroha, Chandausi, and Sambhal in 1865. In the following year, Hasanpur and Thakurdwara saw the opening of comparable establishments. The *halkabandi* system of rural schools was implemented concurrently, but during the mutiny, this whole system of schooling fell apart throughout the North-Western provinces. In Moradabad, the British government schools seemed to be in decline after 1857. After a few years, it seemed that the condition of schools was ameliorated, once again, as in previous years. Moradabad had 399 schools between 1860 and 1861, according to British education reports. However, the number dropped to 342 schools over the next ten years, from 1861 to 1871.[16]

Understanding demographic patterns of the Moradabad district in the nineteenth century is crucial since, as was previously indicated, data from the Settlement Officer indicates that the number of schools was declining in 1872. In comparison to their proportion of the population, Muslims were notably under-represented in English schools in 1881–1882. They accounted for 12.6% of the total students in Punjab, compared to 48.2% in Awadh, a significantly

[13] Ibid., 171.

[14] H.R. Nevill, *Moradabad: A Gazetteer.* vol. XVI, (Allahabad: 1911), 136-37.

[15] Mahmood Ahmad Abbasi, *Tarikh-i-Amroha,* (Mumbai: Kitab Daar, 2005), 145-150.

[16] M. Kempson, *Report of the Progress of Education in the North-Western Provinces 1872-73.* Part I. (Allahabad: 1873), 9.

higher proportion of the population, where they made up 5.5% of students despite constituting 10% of the total population. On the other hand, Muslims were far more prevalent in Oriental or indigenous schools, where they made up 58.1% of the student body in Punjab, and 45.1% in North-Western Provinces.[17] Furthermore, with regards to Moradabad, only 4,777 of 1,122,125 people attended school, according to a different settlement survey from 1881.[18]

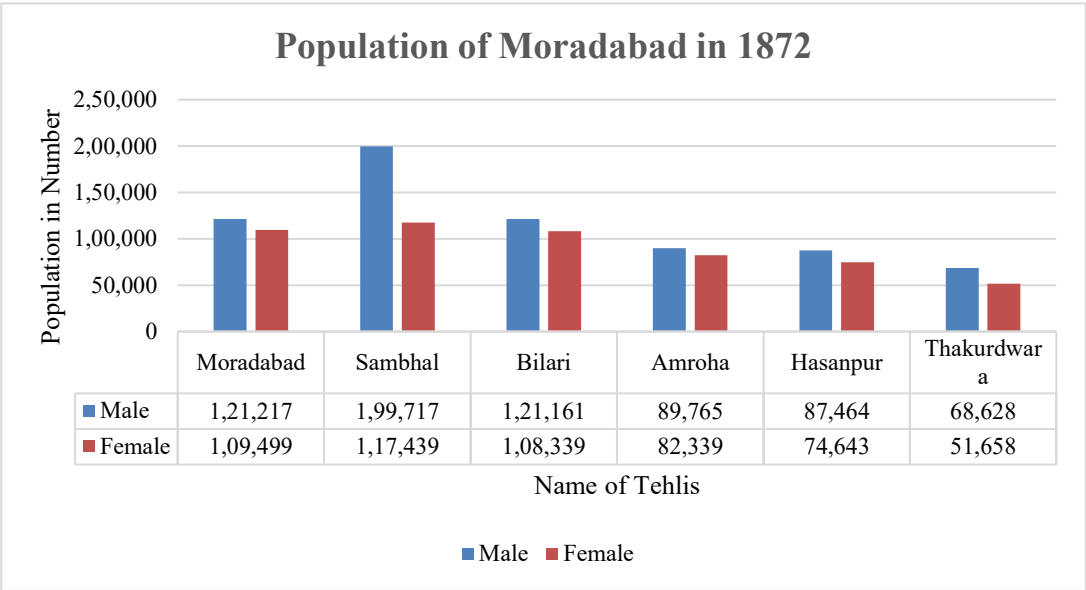


**Figure 1: Population of Moradabad in 1872**
**Source: Based on *Final Report on the Settlement of the Moradabad District.***

Colonial reports regarding the district's educational situation revealed that, despite a population believed to be well over a million (as the chart above demonstrates), there was a pitifully small number of students receiving education in institutions of Moradabad. It was also observed that at least 13% of these pupils attended schools established by the American Mission.[19] A large number of accounts indicate that these missionary organisations had achieved a notable level of success, and the fact that the local population had started using their facilities was regarded with some satisfaction. In evaluating Moradabad's sluggish educational growth, the administration mostly blamed

[17] *Report on The Education Commission,* 1882, 480-490; see also P. Hardy, *The Muslims of British India.* (Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 120-125.

[18] Final Report on The Settlement of Moradabad District, date 1881, File No. D-25201R, Amir-ud Daula Library, Lucknow, 6-7.

[19] Ibid, 90.

the situation on India's socio-economic circumstances. It was anticipated that the development of education would only occur in measured and steady stages as a majority of the population barely managed to sustain above the actual poverty line.[20]

It appears that only two significant institutions—a mission school and a secondary school—were deemed sufficient in Moradabad in 1840. On the basis of settlement reports and records, it must be acknowledged that Moradabad's educational system continuously failed to educate the great majority of society at the start of the nineteenth century.[21] The British Government observed that, in the general state of society at the time, the majority of people remained in profound ignorance, even though among the zamindars—especially those employed by the government—there was an elite class that had some notable accomplishments to its name. The social and theological divide that separated the Hindu tenantry from the Muhammadan landlords kept them in a position of extraordinary poverty and submissiveness, more abhorrent than was usually seen even in other parts of the kingdom. Furthermore, lower-class citizens and members of the agrarian class were denied entry to schools despite Moradabad's Muslim majority.[22]

As the table below demonstrates, *halkabandi* schools had somewhat higher enrolment over the same period, despite the fact that there were relatively few students enrolled in government English schools and government higher institutions. Thus, it can be said that, during the nineteenth century, Moradabad's vernacular education was more popular than English government institutions. After 1859, village schools started again, despite the re-establishment of the tehsil schools on a large scale. Bilari tehsil restarted the construction of schools gradually by 1860, followed by Moradabad and Hasanpur in 1862, Sambhal in 1863, Amroha in 1865, and Thakurdwara around three years later.[23] In 1865, Moradabad had 12 Anglo-Vernacular schools with boarding facilities. During the academic year of 1864–65, there were seven tehsil schools enrolling a total of 887 students; this figure rose to 1,132 students in 1865–66, while the number of tehsil schools remained

[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid, 90-91.
[23] Nevill, *Moradabad,* 137.

unchanged at seven.[24] With respect to *halkabandi* institutions, 59 schools were recorded in 1864–65, enrolled 2,001 students. In the subsequent year (1865–66), the number of *halkabandi* schools increased to 66, with total enrolment rising to 2,314 students.[25] These data sets demonstrate that, after 1857, the popularity of vernacular institutions grew in greater numbers, and the number of enrolments also increased. So, after the great revolt of 1857, the British government remarked on the disadvantages of British English schools, including regional and local educational bodies, and suggested changes. The government expressed the desire to increase the enrolment of students in schools. From then on, the government implemented teacher training programmes in *halkabandi*, tehsil, zila, and normal schools. As stated above, Mr. Regear, the Director of the Public Instruction department, gave instructions to all types of schools to ensure that their teachers had the appropriate training.[26]

| Sr. no. | Class of Schools | Numbers | No. of Students | | | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | Hindu | Muslims | Others | |
| 1. | Government English Schools | 1 | 144 | 37 | - | 181 |
| 2. | Government Vernacular High Schools, expects English | 10 | 236 | 229 | 69 | 534 |
| 3. | Government *Halkabandi* Schools | 114 | 1466 | 1236 | 541 | 3239 |
| 4. | Girls' School | 4 | 150 | - | - | 150 |
| 5. | Municipal-aided Government Schools | 1 | - | 18 | - | 18 |
| 6. | Municipal-unaided Government Schools | 3 | 18 | 22 | 9 | 49 |
| 7. | Mission Schools for Girls & Boys | 13 | 389 | 159 | 63 | 606 |
| | **Total** | **146** | **2403** | **1701** | **682** | **4,826** |

**Table 1: Class of Schools of Moradabad in 1879**
**Source: Based on *Final Report on the Settlement of the Moradabad District***

[24] M. Kempson, *Reports on the Progress of Education in the North-Western Province 1865-66.* (Allahabad: 1866), 13.

[25] Ibid, 33.

[26] Finance Department, dated 1856-57, File No. R1-32, NIA, 2-4.

Apart from primary education, Moradabad High School was established in 1863, under the Bareilly College plan of 1868. In 1865, government Anglo-Vernacular schools were also established in Chandausi and Amroha; the latter served as the model for the town's current high school. The founding of girls' schools in Chandausi, Sambhal, and Moradabad in 1863 was also a noteworthy intervention. In larger towns, free municipal schools were implemented a few years later. The main cause for the slow educational advancement between 1875 and 1885 was a lack of funding. However, after the district board of Moradabad took over the management of tehsil and vernacular schools, there was a gradual increase in enrolment of students.[27] Both the number of schools and student enrolment had significantly increased, with the latter increasing from 6,253 in 1898–1899 to 13,795 in 1908–1909.

While some of these indigenous schools, such as the Amroha Arabic School, the Islamia Madrassa in Moradabad, and the pathshala run by the Arya Samaj, were of a higher calibre, the majority were modest and of little significance. In 1886, the Directors of Public Instruction's report also mentions that in Moradabad 46 and in Bareilly 61 students were enrolled in high schools. The Director of Public Instruction was also considering the introduction of more reforms for the educational progress of Moradabad.[28] The region had the lowest rates of enrolment when compared to other districts in the North-Western Provinces, including Lucknow, Bareilly, Agra, Aligarh, etc. However, the main reason for this was that a sizeable number of children were enrolled in vernacular schools instead of institutions supported by the government.

A number of secondary schools, including middle vernacular schools with boarding houses in Moradabad, Chandausi, Thakurdwara, Sambhal, Amroha, Kanth, and Hasanpur, were being run by the district board. In addition to providing grants-in-aid to 62 indigenous schools, the same body also oversaw 20 schools for girls, 79 lower primary schools, and 52 upper primary schools. In addition to providing grants-in-aid to 22 elementary schools, including one for girls run by the Arya Samaj in Sambhal, the municipal authorities also

[27] Esha Bashanti Joshi, *Uttar Pradesh District Gazetteer: Moradabad.* (Allahabad: 1968), 254-55.

[28] Home Department Proceedings, December 1886. Home Education, File No. 29-31, NIA, 1-7.

sponsored five girls' schools.[29] A notable gap in education was found in Moradabad district in 1881, despite efforts by Christian missionaries and the British administration to encourage indigenous English education. This type of disparity was observed by Moradabad settlement officer E. Alexandar. He informs us that the proportion of school-age individuals enrolled in educational institutions is extremely low.[30] This information is indicated below:

| Sr.no. | Nature of the Schools | Number of Students |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | Government English Schools | 181 |
| 2. | Government Vernacular Schools | 534 |
| 3. | *Halkabandi* Schools | 3239 |
| 4. | Girls' Schools | 150 |
| 5. | Municipal-aided Government Schools | 18 |
| 6. | Municipal-unaided Schools | 49 |
| 7. | Mission (girls and boys) Schools | 606 |

**Table 2: Schools in Moradabad during 1881**
**Source: Based on *The Settlement Report of Moradabad.***

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, the management of the Moradabad Education Department and Public Instructions made notable progress in all facets of education. The overall academic standard of schools increased significantly, as seen by the noticeable increase in the percentage of applicants who passed exams. At the same time, a large portion of the cost of education had been shifted from the government to private citizens who benefited from it more immediately. Administrative order and systematic organisation had been strengthened in each department. Although the condition of schools and students required careful and continuous attention, there was no reason to doubt that elementary village schools eventually benefited from reforms that were both necessary, yet sluggish, in their execution. However, at the grassroots level, a few individuals collaborated with the British government to enhance educational facilities in Moradabad district. For instance, Hakim Niaz Ali Khan, Sahu Ram Ratan, and Sahu Shyam

[29] *Final Report on the Settlement of Moradabad District*, 6.
[30] Ibid, 6-7.

Sundar were recognised for their outstanding contributions to the education department.[31]

To promote education, the British government provided aid to both English and vernacular schools in Moradabad. For instance, in 1866, the British government provided an aid of 12600 for the promotion of Anglo-Vernacular education in the Moradabad region.[32] So, for this purpose, as reported in 1872-73, the British government granted funds to the schools of Moradabad for the promotion of vernacular education. In this respect, 1000 rupees were allotted to Moradabad for the promotion of the zila school. Sambhal and Dhanaura received grants of 125 and 120 rupees, respectively, for free schools in their respective regions, while Amroha allocated 1,020 rupees to Anglo-vernacular schools.[33] In the very next year, the report of 1873–74 indicates that Moradabad was granted a sum of 1,000 rupees for the construction and maintenance of school compounds and boarding houses.

In addition, the Dhanaura region received 120 rupees for the promotion of primary education, while Amroha was allocated 1,200 rupees to support Anglo-Vernacular schools. In the Sambhal region, funds amounting to 1,000 rupees were allocated for vernacular education, of which 500 rupees were assigned to tehsil schools, 300 rupees to *halkabandi* schools, and 200 rupees to female schools.[34] A detailed table 3 provides information regarding the number of schools and the funds expended on educational institutions, as well as on students in the year 1881. There were 168 government-run and government-aided schools. The total number of missionary schools operating during 1881 was slightly less than two hundred, even if the 46 schools, listed previously, were to be considered. This was because some missionary institutions were already classified as government-aided schools.

[31] *Report On Administration of The North West Provinces and Oudh,* (Allahabad: 1889), 164.

[32] Report on Zilla Schools in The North Western Province, Home Department Education Branch, File No. 7-13, Date 1866, NIA, 5-18.

[33] M. Kempson, *Report of the Progress of Education,* 9.

[34] M. Kempson, *Report of the Progress of Education in the North-Western Provinces 1873-74.* Part II. (Allahabad: 1874), 6.

| Class of School | | | Numbers of Schools | Numbers of Students | | | Average daily Attendance | Cost per student | | | Expenditure borne by State | Total charges |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | Hindu | Muslim | Others | | Rs. | P | A | | |
| Government and Municipal | **Zila High School** | | 1 | 166 | 37 | - | 149 | 75 | 6 | 9 | 7197 | **11238** |
| | **Tahsil & Pargana** | | 8 | 299 | 215 | - | 387 | 7 | 1 | 8 | 2366 | **2749** |
| | **Halkabandi** | **Boys** | 114 | 2029 | 1230 | - | 2330 | 6 | 3 | 0 | - | **14412** |
| | | **Girls** | 6 | 16 | 97 | - | 76 | 6 | 4 | 10 | - | **479** |
| | **Government Girls** | | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | **-** |
| | **Municipal** | **Boys** | 10 | 169 | 234 | - | 299 | 4 | 7 | 10 | - | **1342** |
| | | **Girls** | 3 | 35 | 21 | - | 42 | 9 | 2 | 3 | - | **384** |
| Aided by Government | **Boys School** | | 4 | 251 | 102 | 68 | 366 | 12 | 8 | 10 | 1596 | **4595** |
| | **Girls School** | | 17 | 102 | 343 | 101 | 421 | 9 | 3 | 9 | 1392 | **3888** |
| | | **Total** | **163** | **3067** | **2288** | **169** | **4070** | **-** | **-** | **-** | **12551** | **39087** |

**Table 3: Schools in Moradabad during 1881**
**Source: Based on the *Report of the Progress of Education in the North-Western Provinces 1873-74***

The average annual cost of education at government schools was raised to Rs. 9-9-8 per student due to the comparatively high maintenance costs of the zila school. On the other hand, exclusively rural *(halkabandi)* schools only charged Rs. 6-3-0 for instruction, which is about the same amount that was spent in missionary schools. Village schools were included in the latter group, even if the money was directly drawn from government coffers. This structure was justified by the fact that, in addition to the usual land tax, a sum equal to, or greater than, the subsidies provided to these organisations was collected separately.[35]

The total number of schools under the Public Instruction Department, as mentioned in the report of March 31, 1881, included six tehsil schools with 403 students enrolled, two pargana schools with 111 students, 114 *halkabandi* schools with 3,259 students, 1 tehsil school at Sambhal with 49 students enrolled, six *halkabandi* girls' schools with 113 students, eight municipal boys' schools with 288 students enrolled, three municipally funded girls' schools with 56 students enrolled, and one Anglo-vernacular boys' school at Amroha. While pargana schools were located in Sirsi in the Sambhal tehsil and Kant in the Amroha tehsil, more tehsil schools were situated in Moradabad, Chandausi, Hasanpur, Amroha, Thakurdwara, and Sambhal. There was a privately run school in Sambhal that was the only establishment in the district offering Sanskrit instruction. Government support was given to the missionary school at Moradabad, which was a middle English institution with a lower primary branch.

At the annual inspection, the Christian girls' boarding school, which had 94 students spread across nine classes, received great praise for its effectiveness.[36] The subsidies given to other mission schools of the district, located in Hasanpur and Sambhal, were also said to be entirely justified. The missionary school at Sambhal had three departments, and taught Hindi, Persian, and English. Primary education received Rs. 15,000 during the fiscal year of 1880–81, while middle-class education, which included tehsil and pargana institutions, received Rs. 2,478.[37] The pedagogy and syllabus of vernacular

[35] F.H. Fisher, *Statistical Descriptive and Historical Account of The North Western Provinces of India: Moradabad.* vol IX Part II. (Allahabad: 1883), 87-88.

[36] Proceedings of Home Department of Education, File No. 31-118, dated 1888, NIA, 422.

[37] F.H. Fisher, *Statistical Descriptive,* 89

institutions were very localised versions of *akhlaq*, science and native languages such as Urdu, Persian, Sanskrit, etc.[38]

The organised condition of education in the district was mostly a result of British control. The first systematic attempt to create a list of the resources available for population education took place between 1846 and 1848. The government received returns from the then-collection of Moradabad, which showed that there were 248 Arabic and Persian schools that educated 1,710 students at an average monthly cost of Rs. 5-7-9 per school. Furthermore, 81 Sanskrit and Hindi schools were listed, instructing 1,127 students at an average monthly cost of Rs. 3-11-2 per school. Amroha had 45 Persian and 5 Hindi schools, whereas Moradabad had 64 Persian and 6 Hindi schools inside the city's borders. The district was reported to include 110 towns with schools of some kind. When comparing the nominal school enrolment for 1846–1848 and 1880–1881, it is evident that the latter year's total does not include any indigenous schools, which were the same kind of establishments that comprised every school in the earlier years. This distinction is crucial for understanding the development and evolution of the educational system during British control.[39]

What impact did education have on Moradabad society during the early years of British rule? According to the 1872 census data, just 1 female and 21,154 males (or 3.54% of the entire male population) were recorded as literate. If these numbers are correct, they reveal the inadequacy of women's education at the time.[40] However, given that the 1881 census showed literacy rates of just 3.3% for men and 0.9% for women, the male literacy percentage seems to have been exaggerated. Subsequent censuses reveal a slow improvement. By 1891, the equivalent percentages for boys and females increased to 3.6% and 1.6%, respectively, and by 1901, they had risen to 3.73% and 2.8%, respectively.[41]

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[38] Avril A. Powell, "Old Books in New Buildings: Ethics and Education in Colonial India," in *Knowledge production, Pedagogy, and Institutions in Colonial India,* eds. Indrani Sengupta and Daud Ali. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 199-205.

[39] Ibid, 89.

[40] H.J. Boas, *Final Report on the Eleventh Settlement of the Moradabad District.* (Allahabad: 1909), 05.

[41] F.H. Fisher, *Statistical Descriptive,* 88-90.

Although there was reason to anticipate more improvement in succeeding censuses, the district's educational status remained terribly behind despite these advancements. Due, in significant part, to the enormous number of Muhammadan labourers and farmers, Hindus had a higher level of education than Muslims. The literacy rate for Hindus was 3.76% among men and 3.44% among Muslims, whereas the difference was significantly larger for Hindus among females. The Persian script was more widely used than Nagari, just like in the nearby districts on this side of the Ganges. Among the literate population, 51.9% knew the old script, 38.4% knew the latter, and 9.4% knew both.[42] The table below highlights the literacy rate of the population of Moradabad in 1903.[43]

| Sr. no. | Name of Tehsils | Population | No. of Persons able to read and write | Literacy Rate in % |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | Moradabad | 2,45,369 | 7,668 | 3.13 |
| 2. | Thakurdwara | 1,16,814 | 1,606 | 1.37 |
| 3. | Bilhari | 2,16,340 | 5,003 | 2.31 |
| 4. | Sambhal | 2,45,886 | 4,035 | 1.64 |
| 5. | Amroha | 2,06,564 | 4,467 | 2.16 |
| 6. | Hasanpur | 1,61,020 | 2,412 | 1.50 |
| **District Total** | | **1,191,993** | **25,190** | **2.11** |

**Table 4. Literacy Rate of Moradabad region in 1903**
**Source: Based on *The Imperial Gazetteer of India*.**

The literacy rates for each of Moradabad's tehsils in 1903 are shown in the table. It shows that Thakurdwara had the lowest literacy rate among all the tehsils, while Moradabad had the highest. However, the data indicate that the literacy rate of Amroha, which Raisur M. Rahman described as a highly educated and cultural *qasba,* is especially satisfactory. Even Bilhari tehsil records a better result than Amroha.[44]

[42] Ibid, 90.

[43] *The Imperial Gazetteer of India,* vol. XVII. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1908), 424.

[44] M. Raisur Rahman, *Locale, Everyday Islam and Modernity,* chapter 5 and 6.

**Beyond Conversion: Missionaries and Vernacular Education**

The Christian missionaries made important contributions to the sphere of education in the Moradabad district. Anglican missionaries mainly targeted Brahmans and other upper-caste Hindus, whereas American Episcopal, Baptist, and Methodist missions predominantly targeted lower-caste populations.[45] Specifically, American missions focused on groups labelled as Chamar (leather-tanners) and Bhangi (sweepers). These educational missions were not only hesitant to use mass conversion tactics, but they also chose to ignore the demographic shifts and mass movements that changed northern India between 1890 and 1910. One missionary noted, 'the only mission work being carried on in the district is that of the American Methodist Mission, which confines itself entirely to the lowest castes' in reference to Moradabad District.[46] Sayyid Ahmad Khan, who thought that Christian missionaries had a significant role in the great uprising of 1857, also brought up the wrong actions of Christian missionaries. Following this, he claimed, missionary schools were established to impart Christian doctrines. Covenant officers in higher positions, and with much authority, frequently visited these schools to encourage the local community to enrol their children. Students at these institutes were regularly asked questions such as "Who is your God?" to extract religious identification.[47]

Like the Nigam schools in the Bijnor area, the American Mission opened a school in Moradabad in 1860, and an Anglo-vernacular school was created in Sugannagar with the support of local landowners. The report of 1873-74 mentions three schools which were run by missionaries named American Methodist Episcopalian Mission School Sambhal, American Methodist Episcopalian Mission School of Tarin Sarai Amroha, and Subscription Anglo-Vernacular School Amroha.[48] In addition to the government high schools in Moradabad and Amroha, the American Mission also runs a third similar high school in Moradabad called Bishop Parker Memorial School. Along with

[45] Foreign Department, File No R1/23, Date 25 April 1803, NIA, 2-3.

[46] *Report and Minutes of the North India Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church.* (Lucknow: 1897), 14, 37, 44-47; Hayden J.A. Bellenoit, *Missionary Education and Empire in Late Colonial India, 1860-1920.* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 76-77.

[47] Sayyid Aḥmad Khan, *Asbab-i-Baghawat-i-Hind,* (Lahore: 1859), 19-20.

[48] M. Kempson, *Report of the Progress of Education*. II, 6.

several primary schools for kids of both sexes spread over the area, the mission also runs a sizable boarding school for females in Moradabad, an Anglo-Vernacular middle school in Sambhal, and more. The widow of a prosperous local businessman named Sham Sundar recently opened a fourth high school in Chandausi.[49]

In the Moradabad region, certain aided female normal schools were operated with the support of the government and local missionary organisations. The specific subjects taught in these institutions are not clearly documented; however, Urdu appears to have been the primary medium of instruction.[50] Enrolments in these schools were notably limited, with only eight female students recorded despite the region's larger population.[51] In order to assess the levels of education in North-Western provinces, including Lucknow, Benares, Mirzapur, Bijnor, Moradabad, Bareilly, etc., Christian Missionaries organised the North Indian Conference in 1895. Bishop W. X. Ninde and secretary B.H. Badley decided to organise a committee to discuss the advancement of missionary education in Moradabad within that conference. In response to T.B. Scott's notification concerns school finance and enrolment, a special committee led by E.W. Parker reported to the bishop the next year and decided to fund missionaries and other vernacular institutions.[52]

**Modern Education in Vernacular Madrassa**

Sayyid Ahmad Khan created a platform for vernacular education within madrassa institutions in the North-Western Provinces. He connected *'jadidiyat'* (modernity) with scientific temperament and religion, as well as Oriental systems. During his tenure as District Judge of Moradabad, Sayyid Ahmad

[49] B.H. Badley, *A Brief Account of the Missionaries of the Methodist Episcopal Church India.* (Lucknow: 1876), 18. The report's author, B.H. Badley, served as the Secretary of the Moradabad Methodist Church and several missionary schools, including those in Amroha, Sambhal, Bijnor, and Moradabad. Aside from them, Melville Cox Elliot, an American, spent a considerable amount of time teaching in Moradabad's missionary schools before passing away in Almora.

[50] Home Education Department, File No.50-56, dated 1892, NIA, 4. This report mentions that, till 1889, the medium of instruction in indigenous schools was the native language if they had a large number of students, instead of English.

[51] *Selections from the Educational Records: 1859-1871,* vol. I. (Delhi: 1960), 439-440.

[52] B.H. Badley, *A Brief Account of the Missionaries*, 15-28.

Khan demonstrated a sustained interest in educational reform. In this context, he established a Persian madrassa in 1858 and constituted a committee to oversee its administration.[53] This institution was among the earliest religious schools to provide education in the sciences. In a later phase, this madrassa was merged with a tehsil-level school founded by the British officer John Strachey.[54] Although modest in scale, this initiative was conceived by Sayyid Ahmad Khan as part of a project of far-reaching significance.[55] With the support and encouragement of British officials, he sought to persuade the affluent and socially respected members of both Hindu and Muslim communities to enrol their 'sons' in a public educational institution. He reinforced his advocacy through personal examples by admitting his own son, Syed Mahmood, to the school and by financing two of the four scholarships offered.

At the public examination held on 1 January 1860, Sayyid Ahmad Khan appealed to the indigenous elite to reflect upon the tradition of ancient Hindu pathshalas and to consult the historical experience of Muslim society. He said that a thorough analysis of the past would show that notable leaders had always considered their children's education in sizeable public institutions to be an honour. He maintained that all notable pandits and maulvis, who were respected by society in the past and present, had engaged in this behaviour. He insisted that, rather than receiving their education and intellectual distinction in the privacy of their homes, these individuals had obtained them in public institutions.[56]

Even Sayyid Ahmad Khan wanted to create a scientific society for education in Moradabad, but due to his transfer to Ghazipur, it later developed in

[53] Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan.* (Delhi: Publication Division, 1966), 49; David Lelyveld, *Aligarh's first Generation: Muslim Solidarity in British India.* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978), 60.

[54] Letter regarding Pension to Maulvi Shariyat Ullah, Foreign and Political Department. File No. R-1/77, date 19 February 1807, NIA, 2-3.

[55] Altaf Husain Hali, *Hayat-i-Javed.* (Delhi: Qaumi Council Baraye Farog-e-Urdu Zaban, 1979), 130-139.

[56] Sayyid Ahmad Khan, *Asbab-i-Baghawat-i-Hind,* (Lahore: 1859), 19-20. Sayyid Ahmad Khan, *History of the Bijnor Rebellion,* tr. Hafeez Malik and Morris Dembo. (Delhi: Idarah-i-Adabiyat-i-Dilli, 1982), XVIII.

Aligarh as the Anglo-Oriental Society.[57] In a later period, Nawab Muhammad Husain presided over a meeting of M.A.O. College on February 10, 1873, whereby recommendations for the establishment of the college were solicited. Of them, twenty-five were willing to establish in Aligarh, while Mir Syed Zahoor Husain favoured Moradabad, and Maulvi Muhammad Haider Husain approved of Allahabad.[58] Since vernacular institutions were already offering science, mathematics, and language teaching in native languages, it might be argued that Sayyid Ahmad Khan's introduction of indigenous and vernacular learning in Moradabad was not a new development. Thus, Zahoor Husain's viewpoint highlights the significance of Moradabad as an alma mater in the nineteenth century. Later, Sayyid Ahmad Khan and his companion founded the Mohammadan Educational Conference in 1886, which was converted into All India Muslim Educational Conference, deeply devoted to providing education to the Muslim society.

The Conference's initiatives eventually succeeded, and on September 2, 1894, the government of the North-Western Provinces resolved to implement the 'Scheme of Religious Education' proposed by Vigar-ul-Mulk in his pamphlet *'A Scheme for the Introduction of Religious Instruction in Government Schools and Colleges.'*[59] The pamphlet was submitted to the Director of Public Instruction, and after discussions among officials, the Lieutenant-Governor decided to 'trial the scheme…though in a somewhat modified form. It was initially introduced on an experimental basis at Government High School in Amroha, Moradabad district. Later, on 31 July 1896, a circular instructed all Anglo-vernacular schools to schedule second-language lessons so that a single teacher could provide two half-hour sessions of religious instruction per week to boys whose parents desired it. This marked the first instance of the Conference successfully influencing government policy.[60]

What was the situation of education for girls in madrassas established by Sayyid Ahmad Khan not mentioned by the report? Even his appeal was for

[57] J. P. Naik, *Selections for Educational Records of the Government of India 1860-87,* vol. II. (Delhi: 1963), 528.

[58] Sayyid Ahmad Khan, "Roaded Membaran Majlis Khazinat-ul Baza-at ul Tasiys Madrissart-ul Uloom," *Fikr-wa-Nazr.* April, 1964 (rep.), 217-221.

[59] Abdul Rashid Khan, *The All India Muslim Educational Conference*, 75.

[60] Ibid.

'sons' of the elite class, which is a question mark on the aims for the establishment of a madrassa. But in a few other schools, girls were allowed to receive their education in a manner, language, and religion.[61] In this regard, Gail Minault argues that, though Sayyid Ahmad Khan was establishing a madrassa in the North-Western Provinces, he was not concerned about girls' education. Even his mother had received formal education at home, and not in a madrassa.[62]

On November 5, another madrassa was established due to the diligent work of the local committee and the kind donations of well-known, respected city dwellers. However, the appointment of all teachers, the placement of students in classes, and the establishment of an efficient framework for the institution's operations did not occur until the start of the subsequent month. It was noted that none of the boys who were accepted into the madrassa had received education beyond the fourth grade. As a result, junior students' primary education made up the majority of the curriculum. For instance, third-class and fourth-standard student Abdul Wasi was studying the rule of trinity, while other students, including Anwar Suhaili and Amanullah Husaini, were studying *Gulistan* and *Bostan, Dastur,* and Urdu and Persian translation exercises, as well as basic arithmetic (multiplication, division, addition, and subtraction). The madrassa had registered 175 pupils at the time of the exam on January 1st, with 103 of them being Muslim and 72 being Hindu.[63]

## Conclusion

Considering the concepts, terminologies, and arguments presented earlier, this study has demonstrated that during the nineteenth century, Moradabad became a major centre of vernacular education, in addition to being a centre of British administration. According to the sources cited throughout this paper, indigenous schools continued to register more students in the early

[61] Patrica Jeffery, et al., "The First Madrasa: Learned Mawlawis and Educated Mother," in *Islamic Education, Diversity, and National Identity,* eds. Jan-Peter Hartung and Helmut Reifeld. (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006), 240-242.

[62] Gail Minault, *Secluded Scholars: Women Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India.* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 12.

[63] *Report of the Primary of the Moradabad Mudrissa, held on Ist January, 1860,* in ed. Hafeez Malik. *Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's Educational Philosophy: A Documentary Record*. (Islamabad: National Institute of Historical and Cultural Research, 1989), 11-16.

nineteenth century, even as the British government and Christian missionaries encouraged vernacular education, proving to be especially helpful for female students. Despite the gender gap that was apparent in madrassas, boys and girls attended indigenous, *halkabandi,* and zila schools in roughly equal numbers. The significance of indigenous and vernacular institutions may be explained by Sayyid Ahmad Khan's argument that British intervention in traditional structures caused societal instability and ultimately contributed to the Revolt of 1857. This emphasises how important native educational institutions were, on a larger societal scale. Overall, the study maintains that indigenous institutions, especially *halkabandi* and tehsil schools, continued to play a significant role in the vernacularisation of education in the North-Western Provinces, well into the later decades of the nineteenth century despite colonial modernity's failure to completely replace Moradabad's pre-existing educational structures.

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# Śaṅkaradeva and Women: Neo-Vaiṣṇavism and the Gender Question

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*The gender question and the role of Śaṅkaradeva (1449-1568) are issues of critical importance that have been studied from multiple perspectives. One of the arguments is that he has been perceived to be a harbinger of social equality between genders. In the context of bhakti, the question of gender, especially the role of women, has been studied by various scholars. It has been emphasised, argued, and reiterated that spirituality provided women with agency and freedom. The question of the impact of these two factors has been ubiquitous in studies associated with bhakti. This article seeks to study the outlook of Śaṅkaradeva towards the gender question, and study the implications of his message in the context of societal norms prevalent in society. The article is divided into two broad sub-themes pertaining to the central theme. The first section explores the presence and nature of women's voice and representation in Śaṅkaradeva's Neo-Vaiṣṇavism. The second section studies the implications of the broader social milieu in which the compositions were contextualised.*

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**Keywords:** Śaṅkaradeva, Neo-Vaiṣṇavism, Bhakti, Gender, Women

স্ত্রী বাল্য বৃদ্ধ সমস্তৰে অধিকাৰ।
চাণ্ডালকো কৰে নামে তেখনে উদ্ধাৰ॥ (ভাগৱত- দ্বিতীয় স্কন্ধ)[1]

*Strī bālya briddha samaste adhikāra /*
*Cāṇḍālako kare nāme tekhane uddhāra //* (*Bhāgavata II*)

Women, children, elderly everyone has a right.

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**Note on transliterations and translations**: Most of the translations and transliterations have been carried out by the author, except where otherwise specified. Although every effort has been made to maintain accuracy in meaning and context, slight variations in syntax and expression may be observed in the English translations.

[1] Nabin Candra Sarma, ed., *Axamīyā Sampūrna Srīmadbhāgavata*, 2nd ed. (Guwahati: Jyoti Prakashan, 2007), 36.

*Nāma* can then even uplift Cāṇḍālas.

This article is a study of Śaṅkaradeva's outlook towards the gender question and the implications of his message on the prevalent societal norms. Śaṅkaradeva, a fifteenth-and sixteenth-century bhakti leader who heralded the beginning of Neo-Vaiṣṇavism, is highly revered across Assam. A multifaceted figure who has left an indelible mark on diverse fields, including literature, culture and religion, his contributions are central to any understanding of the socio-cultural fabric of Assam. The question of bhakti and gender within the bhakti paradigm has been studied by authors from diverse perspectives. Vijaya Ramaswamy has argued that spirituality provided Indian women with the freedom which was denied by orthodox Hindu society.[2] Anshu Malhotra highlights how bhakti is perceived as a "feminised"[3] religion since many saints (*bhaktas*) adopt the voice of women in relation to their male god.[4] This article will attempt to explore themes including the presence of female voices, their representation, and the spiritual and social agency accorded to them within the contours of Śaṅkaradeva's Neo-Vaiṣṇavism. It will study these themes in juxtaposition and context of regional, social factors, as well as intellectual and bhakti milieu.

The 1970s marked the "emergence of the grassroots women's movement,"[5] which essentially challenged the status quo in every aspect of the social sphere. It was in this socio-political context that academicians and researchers grappled with the question of gender and feminist theories. Researchers engaged in studying themes associated with patriarchy, inherent heterogeneity of women as a social category, as well as moving beyond the binaries of twofold gender classification. Hence, under the ambit of such fundamental research approaches, researchers engaged and dealt with multiple methodological questions and themes. These included those

[2] Vijaya Ramaswamy, "Rebel-Conformists? Women Saints in Medieval South India," *Anthropos* 87, nos. 1-3 (1992): 133, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40462578?read-now=1&seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents.

[3] Anshu Malhotra, "Bhakti and the Gendered Self: A Courtesan and a Consort in Mid-Nineteenth Century Punjab." *Modern Asian Studies* 46, no. 6 (November 2012): 1507, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41683036?read-now=1#page_scan_tab_contents.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Kumkum Roy, *The Power of Gender and the Gender of Power*, 2nd Impression (New Delhi: OUP, 2011), 1.

associated with gender relations and locating women within a framework of hierarchies and strategies.[6] In the introduction to her anthology of essays, Kumkum Roy mentions that in response to scholarship located within a nationalist framework and an invariably top-down historical approach, it became imperative to question strategies through which historians studied marginalised groups. This especially included those of women who were either rendered invisible or did not have access to literate traditions.[7] In the broader bhakti milieu, there were several women saints whose roles and compositions have been studied by several scholars. S. M. Pandey and Norman Zide have studied the contributions of Mīrābāi. In their study, they provide a profile of her life as well as her philosophy, interspersed with snippets of her compositions and the element of bhakti.[8]

Kumkum Sangari studied Mīrābāi's bhakti amidst complex and contradictory levels of patriarchal assumptions of a Rajput state, Brahmanical texts, as well as a female voice which develops amidst compositions of male bhaktas.[9] John Stratton Hawley, in his monograph on Mīrābāi, Kabir, and Surdas, has studied these three bhakti voices in the context of the historical background in which the texts were produced, since they were collected over a period of time.[10] Apart from Mīrābāi, there were several women bhakti saints from across the subcontinent who marked their own space through their expressions of devotion. They include Karaikkal Ammaiyar, Andal, Akka Mahadevi, Jānābāi, amongst others.[11] Anshu Malhotra engages with the writings of Piro, who was a Muslim prostitute who had come to live in the *dera* of the Sikh guru Gulab Das in Chathianwala. Malhotra studies the various ways by which Piro utilises

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[6] Ibid., p. 2.

[7] Ibid.

[8] S. M. Pandey and Norman Zide, "Mīrābāi and her Contributions to the Bhakti Movement." *History of Religions* 5, no. 1 (Summer 1965): 54-73, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1061803?read-now=1&seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents.

[9] Kumkum Sangari, "Mirabai and the Spiritual Economy of Bhakti." *Economic and Political Weekly* 25, no. 27 (July 1990): 1464-1475, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4396474?read-now=1 &seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents.

[10] John Stratton Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices: Mirabai, Surdas and Kabir in Their Time and Ours* (New York: OUP, 2005).

[11] P. Shailaja, "Women Poet-Saints of Bhakti Movement," in *Bhakti Movement and Literature: Re-forming a Tradition*, ed. M. Rajagopalachary and K. Damodar Rao (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2016), 48-59.

bhakti legends and imagery to build support. She also engages with the radical potential of bhakti and traces her move towards social conformity.[12]

The theme and question of gender in Neo-Vaiṣṇavism have been studied by several scholars. Aparna Mahanta argues that Śaṅkaradeva attempted to inculcate patriarchal norms of women's roles in family and society; however, without complete success. These religious prototypes could be found in his writings. According to her, these orthodox tendencies gained ground in the institutionalisation of the Neo-Vaiṣṇava community. But, in the context of popular Vaiṣṇavism as it developed in villages beyond the purview of the *satras*, women had an equal role in matters of religious observances, albeit in a limited capacity.[13] She argues that women's role was passive and provided no scope for developing a spiritual life, as compared to the opportunities provided to men.[14] An aspect associated with this theme is the character of Sītā. William L. Smith has argued that although Śaṅkaradeva based his narrative on Vālmikī alone and does not deviate from the central narrative, the portrayal of Sītā's wrath is distinct from the characters as portrayed in the Sanskrit *Rāmāyaṇa.* This is because in Śaṅkaradeva's *Uttara-kāṇḍa*, she is presented with a strong voice who lashes out at the hypocrisy of the callous patriarchal nature of the society. He argued that although Sītā has been portrayed as a devoted wife, her indignation at being asked to perform a second fire ordeal is loud and clear. Smith argued that via the portrayal of both Rāma's and Sītā's characters and reactions, Śaṅkaradeva was trying to portray dual emotions of compassion and devotion.[15]

Jahnabi Gogoi Nath has studied the hagiographical literature to study the relations which existed between men and women during the Middle Ages of

[12] Malhotra, "Bhakti and Gendered Self," 1506.

[13] Aparna Mahanta, "Śaṅkaradeva and the Status of Women in Assamese Society," in *Essays on Śaṅkaradeva*, ed. Ranjit Kumar Dev Goswami (Guwahati: Lawyer's Book Stall, 1996), 203

[14] Ibid., 204.

[15] William L. Smith, "The Wrath of Sita: Sankaradeva's Uttarakanda," (2004): 1-12, accessed June 11, 2026, https://atributetosankaradeva.org/uttarakanda.pdf., accessed on 11.06.26.

Assam, within the bhakti religion.[16] Simashree Bora has explored the theme of gendered spirituality and devotion within the Neo-Vaiṣṇava sect in a way that defined women's roles within the order. Bora conducts a study on three women, viz., Aai Kanaklata, Aai Padmapriya and Sati Radhika, who occupied significant positions in the Neo-Vaiṣṇava order.[17] Through these three stories, she has attempted to explore the gap that exists between the historical narratives that celebrate only male legacies.[18] She further argues that within the monastic order, Neo-Vaiṣṇavism attempted to offer space to women by incorporating stories of a select few. She highlights that the myths and stories which were generated around them only provided a framework of representation. However, their writings revealed that their "gendered self" is not located in relation to devotion or position in the monastic order.[19] Tilottama Misra has translated and commented on Mādhava Kandalī's *Rāmāyaṇa* and Śaṅkaradeva's *Uttarakāṇḍa*, foregrounding gender, socio-political and religious contexts which were prevalent during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, which in turn might have inspired the writers to portray characters in a particular manner.[20]

## Women's Space, Voice and Representation in Śaṅkaradeva's Neo-Vaiṣṇavism

*Pada //*
*jāhe nāma śuni satī satī : nachāḍe bhakati rati re /*
*pekhabo kamalāpati : nāce jaicana satī //*
*cale saba sakhigaṇa: ānande magaṇa mana re /*
*kṛṣṇa kiṅkara bhāṇa : gati meri nārāyaṇa* //4// (*Patnī Prasāda Nāṭa*)[21]

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[16] Jahnabi Gogoi Nath, "Women, Religion and Society in Assam: Reflections from a Medieval Biographical Work," Proceedings of the Indian History Congress 70 (2009-2010): 329-337, https://www.jstor.org/stable/44147679?read-now=1#page_scan_tab_contents.

[17] Simashree Bora, *Revisiting the Past and Unveiling the Gendered Legacy: History and Representation of Women in Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2019), 4.

[18] Ibid., 7.

[19] Ibid., 27-28.

[20] Tilottama Misra, *Sita's Voice in the Assamese Rāmāyaṇa* (New Delhi: Zubaan Books, 2024).

[21] Yashodhara Medhi, *The Plays of Śaṅkaradeva* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2017), 132.

> Verse:
> Hearing whose name the virtuous women do not give up loving devotion.
> The virtuous women dance at the prospect of seeing Kamalapati.
> All the friends go together with their minds engrossed in love,
> The servant of Kṛṣṇa (Śaṅkara) says, "The only refuge for me is Nārāyaṇa."[22]

An aspect of importance associated with the religious traditions and nuances of Śaṅkaradeva's Neo-Vaiṣṇavism was the obliteration of a female component in the worship of Kṛṣṇa vis-à-vis Viṣṇu. Thus, it becomes a desideratum to ask if women find space at all. If yes, how can such representation be interpreted in terms of social equality between genders? In order to analyse these questions, three major tropes and examples as reflected in his compositions will be explored: (i) representation of women in the spiritual space, (ii) anecdote of Satī Rādhikā, (iii) voice of Sītā.

> দাম্ভিক শঠত নকহিবা ইটো তত্ত্ব।
> সদা উপদেশ দিবা বৈষ্ণৱ জনত॥
> স্ত্রী-শূদ্রো কৰে যদি আমাক ভকতি।
> তাহাত কহিবা ইটো জ্ঞান মহামতি॥১৮২৬ (শ্রীকৃষ্ণৰ বৈকুণ্ঠ প্রয়াণ, কীর্ত্তন-ঘোষা)[23]
>
> *Dāmbhika śathata nakahiba ito tatva /*
> *Sadā upadeśa dibā Vaiṣṇava Janata //*
> *Śtrī-śūdro karfe jadi āmāka bhakti /*
> *Tāhāta kahibā ito jnana mahāmati //* 1826 (*Vaikuntha Prayana*, *Kīrtana-ghosā*)
>
> Do not disclose this Truth to one who is self-conceited and deceitful;
> Always give this instruction to the Vaisnavas only.
> Even if the women and the Shudras practice this devotion to Me,

[22] Ibid., 132-133.

[23] Surjya Kanta Hazarika, ed., *Kirttan-Ghosha Aaru Nam-Ghosha* (Guwahati: Bani Mandir, 2021), 467.

Oh! noble one, explain to them this True knowledge. 1826 [24]

ব্যভিচাৰী দুষ্টা ব্রজ যুৱতী।
তথাপি কৃষ্ণত ভৈলা ভকতি॥
জানিলো পাপীয়ো ভজোক মাত্র।
এতেকে ভৈল মুকুতিৰ পাত্র॥১২৮ (পাষণ্ড মর্দ্দন, কীর্ত্তন-ঘোষা)[25]

*Byabhicārī dusta Vraja juwatī /*
*Tathāpi Kṛṣṇata bhoilā bhakti //*
*Jānilo pāpīyo bhajoka matra /*
*Eteke bhoila mukutira pātra //* 128 (*Pasanda Mardana*, *Kīrtana Ghosā*)

Loose and corrupt were the young maids of Vraja;
Yet they adored Krsna with devotion;
Hence I realise that even the sinners, on adoring Krsna,
Become worthy of attaining emancipation. 128[26]

The aforementioned two verses have been quoted from different chapters of *Kīrtana-ghosā,* including *Vaikuntha Prayana* and *Pasanda Mardana,* respectively. Both of these verses provide a glimpse into the question of women and devotion within the Neo-Vaiṣṇava philosophy. In the former verse, Kṛṣṇa is advising Uddhava on aspects related to the mysteries of devotion. He mentions that this knowledge can be shared with women and Shudras if they are inquisitive, but not with people who are conceited and deceitful. In the second verse, the power of worshipping Kṛṣṇa can be highlighted, which was powerful enough to uplift and lead "loose and corrupt"[27] women of Vraja onto paths of emancipation. Two aspects of note can be foregrounded: (i) There was no prejudice against women offering worship, (ii) There was no premium associated with their achieving emancipation. It is noteworthy that within the precincts of religious traditions as developed by Śaṅkaradeva, there was exclusion of women from the focal points of worship. However, in matters of

[24] The English translation is by Chandrakanta Mahanta, trans., *The Kirttana* (Jorhat: Asom Sahitya Sabha, 1990), 264.

[25] Hazarika, *Kirttana-Ghosha,* 32.

[26] The English translation is by Mahanta, *Kirttana*, 17.

[27] Ibid.,17.

offering worship, there existed no segregation as far as their inclusion within the ambit of spirituality was concerned. Further, women also found space in almost all his compositions, and were portrayed as either "Kṛṣṇa-*premī*" or "Kṛṣṇa-*bhakta.*"[28] However, it is also noteworthy to mention that although Śaṅkaradeva was not against providing women space on matters of devotion and spirituality, there were certain conditions attached to matters related to their position within the bhakti order. The anecdote of Satī Rādhikā is an opposite example which can be quoted in this context.

> Once, there was a devastating flood which induced the Bhuyāns to approach Śaṅkaradeva to seek assistance in building a dam. The latter declared that a chaste woman had to offer a handful of soil to hold its foundations. Upon declaration, several *Brāhmaṇas* resorted to the search, however, without any success. One day, a *nadiyal* (fisherman) named Purnananda was passing through the region accompanied by his wife Rādhikā. Upon hearing about the predicament, Rādhikā urged her husband to visit the place. When Śaṅkaradeva and his associates heard about the couple, he asked them to be presented in front of him. One of the first tasks Rādhikā was presented with was to prove her chastity. This required her to fetch water in a basket made of five sticks. However, in her first attempt, she was short by four fingers. When asked to justify, she narrated an incident when she glanced at her brother-in-law while handing him a knife to cut a banana leaf. Śaṅkaradeva decided to overlook the incident and gave his blessings. In the next attempt, she was able to fetch water, which was four more fingers than the previous attempt; thereby proving her chastity. Thus, after fulfilling the requisite precondition, she provided holy water in the creek wherein the dam was constructed, which ultimately saved the people.[29]

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[28] Malini Goswami, "Sankaradevar Dharanat Nari," in *Anunād: Śrīmanta Śaṅkar Āru Asamiyā Saṅskṛti*, ed., Ranjit Kumar Dev Goswami (Guwahati: Bhabani Prints and Publications, 2012), 380.

[29] Maheswar Neog, *Bordowa Gurucharita* (Guwahati: Guwahati Book Stall, 1977), 58-59. Maheswar Neog, *Guru Charita Katha* (Guwahati: Lawyer's Book Stall, 1999), 34. The translation is by the author.

Simashree Bora provides an insightful reference on the appropriation and emancipatory characteristics of Neo-Vaiṣṇavism as reflected in the anecdote. She asserts that the portrayal of lower-caste women as spiritually superior is a customary trope in such narratives. She also argues that there is an inherent flaw of such narratives that is, within the realms of organised religion, in order to be considered as a true Vaiṣṇava, the condition which holds precedence is her identity as a chaste and pure woman.[30] Anshu Malhotra argues that legends and hagiographies of bhakti created openings for women from non-privileged backgrounds. She argues that, however, they were mostly "narrow interstices in ideologies that mostly confined them to given roles."[31] Thus, from the anecdote, two factors can be foregrounded: chastity and low-caste social background. These dual aspects are noteworthy not only in determining Rādhikā's devotion and spirituality, but also held significance for the inclusion and representation of women within the orbit of Neo-Vaiṣṇava bhakti. Another issue of importance which needs to be explored is the extent to which women had a voice in Śaṅkaradeva's writings, for which the example of Sītā will be analysed.

Śaṅkaradeva had translated *Uttara-kāṇḍa*, the last canto of Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa,* in conjunction with Mādhava Kaṇḍali's *Sapta-kāṇḍa Rāmāyaṇa.* The following section forms a part of Sītā's long monologue.

ৰাঘৱক চাই কোপে কটাক্ষে নিৰেখি।
বোলন্ত এৰিলা মোত তুমি কিবা দেখি॥
জানাযে তেজিবা কিয় সম্বৰিলা আগে।
পূৰ্ব্বতে মাৰিলা হুই যেন যুৱাই ভাগে॥ ৭০৮৯
কিনো ৰাম স্বামী মোৰ পুৰুষ দাৰুণ।
নুসুমৰিলাহা একো দিবসৰো গুণ॥
কণ্ঠতে ফৰিল বজ্রে বান্ধিলেক হিয়া।
দূৰ্জ্জনৰ বোলতে নিৰ্ব্বাস মোক দিয়া॥ ৭০৯০
কোন শত্রু তোমাৰ কৰিলো কিবা হানি।
কৰিলা এনুৱা উগ্রদণ্ড কিবা জানি॥

[30] Bora, *Revisiting the Past*, 21.

[31] Malhotra, "Bhakti and Gendered Self," 1538.

ছলবাদে দিলা নিয়া নির্ব্বাসক মনে।
আকস্মিতে তেজৈ যেন ভার্য্যাক টেন্টনে॥ ৭০৯১ (সপ্তকাণ্ড ৰামায়ণ-উত্তৰাকাণ্ড)[32]

*Rāghavaka kope kotakhe nirekhi /*
*Bulanta erilā mot tumi kibā dekhi //*
*Jānāje tejibā kiyo homborilā āge /*
*Purbate mārila hui jena juwāi bhāge //* 7089
*Kino Rāma swami mur purusa dārun /*
*Nusumarilaha eku dibasarau guna //*
*Kāsthate pharilo braje bāndhileka hiyā /*
*Durjjanar bulate nirbasa muka diyā //* 7090
*Kun śatru tumār korilu kibā hani /*
*Karilā enuwā ugradanda kibā jāni //*
*Chalabāde dilā niyā nirbashaka mane /*
*Ākasmite tejoi jen bharjyāka tentane //* 7091 (*Uttara-kāṇḍa Rāmāyaṇa*)

> She, in utter rage, looking at Rāma with a side glance, said, "What for did you disown me? In case you were aware that you would abandon me, then why did you accept me? In case you thought disowning me was quite appropriate, then why did you not kill me at the first instance? O my Lord Rāma, how cruel are you that you were not reminded of any virtues for a day? Your heart is made of wood and is like a vajra, and you exiled me at the words of a wicked person. What inimical deed did I perform against you, or what wrong did I do to you? Why did you disown me so disgracefully? You exiled me treacherously like a wicked person who suddenly abandons his wife.…[33]

The manner in which Sītā has been portrayed provides an important glimpse into the gender question, especially in the context of its composer. Sītā is given a strong voice, which she raises against the patriarchal norms of the society and her husband. This becomes explicit in her reaction to the abandonment. Aradhana Patangiya Goswami has suggested that Sītā's mental strength,

[32] Duttabaruah, *Sapta-kāṇḍa Rāmāyaṇa*, 493.

[33] The English translation is by Shanti Lal Nagar, *Mādhava Kandalī Rāmāyaṇa: Part II* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd, 2000), 236.

personality, and freedom can be an indication of the contemporary condition of women. According to her, as compared to other regions, the tribal demographic composition of ancient Kāmrūpa influenced the representation of women, thereby making them relatively independent and self-sufficient. She was of the opinion that these factors might have influenced Śaṅkaradeva's portrayal of Sītā.[34] The voice of Sītā is a theme which has been discussed by scholars from diverse perspectives.[35] William L. Smith argues that Sītā's reaction was borne out of Śaṅkaradeva's compassion and empathy. Her portrayal as a person of "flesh and blood" who is justifiably enraged at the treatment meted out to her is depicted in contrast to her being a mere passive victim in the Vālmiki rendition.[36] Hiren Gohain has reiterated and elaborated on Smith's observations and has raised further questions on Sītā's wrath. He questions the social conditions which must have compelled Śaṅkaradeva to portray her outburst against the callous patriarchy. He argued that though the bhakti tradition provided a rebellious voice against the established order, it also imparted teachings of making suffering acceptable as an inescapable human fate.[37] Tilottama Misra argues that in Śaṅkaradeva's *Uttarā-kāṇḍa*, Sītā's silence is broken through her response. Misra argues that the poet provides her with scope to express her anger towards her husband's "inhumane

[34] Aradhana Patangiya Goswami, "Sankaradevar Abyartha Kabikalpana Tejaswini Sita," in *Anunād: Śrīmanta Śaṅkar Āru Asamiyā Saṅskṛti*, ed. Ranjit Kumar Dev Goswami (Guwahati: Bhabani Prints and Publications, 2012), 398.

[35] See, Sully Sutherland, "The Voice of Sītā in Valmīki's Sundarakāṇḍa," in *Questioning Ramayanas: A South Asian Tradition*, ed. Paula Richman (London: University of California Press, 2001), 223-238. Sally Sutherland Goldman, "Sītā's War: Gender and Narrative in the Yuddhakāṇḍa of Vālmīki's Rāmāyaṇa," in *Epic Undertaking*, ed. Robert P. Goldman and Muneo Tokunaga (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd, 2009), 139-166. Sudha Gopalkrishnan, "Kumaran Asan's 'Cintāviṣṭayāya Sītā', Sītā, Deep in Thought, a Translation," in *The Multivalence of an Epic: Retelling the Rāmāyaṇa in South India and Southeast Asia*, ed. Parul Pandya Dhar (New York: Routledge, 2024), 232-246.

[36] Smith, "Wrath of Sita," 11.

[37] Hiren Gohain, "A Note on the Medieval Use of Rama Story," in *The Ramayana: Its Impact on Life and Culture*, ed. Bibha Bharali and Priyanka Sarma (Guwahati: Bhabani Offset & Imaging Systems Pvt. Ltd, 2003), 54. With reference to the rationale and logic of fate, Sally J. Sutherland Goldman highlights how the author (in this case, Vālmikī), and the narrative reiterates that Rāma never doubted the fidelity or the nature of Sītā. Rather, he acted along the interests of kingship and dharma. Sally Sutherland Goldman, "Against Their Will: Sexual Assault and the Uttarākāṇḍa." Studies in History 34, no. 2 (May 2018): 2, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0257643018772405.

behaviour."[38] She further argues that bhakti *rasa* remains vindicated in the composition, as she blames her fate since she is unable to serve her husband faithfully for life.[39]

Paula Richman emphasises the multiple ways in which authors, commentators, performers, and communities have reiterated, embraced and made the Rāma story their own.[40] Hence, it becomes noteworthy to ask if the voice provided to Sītā is a reflection of the 'feminist' voice of Śaṅkaradeva, which scholars claim to be a reflection. Further, it is also relevant to ask if the 'voice' can be considered to be a reflection of rebellion against established gendered norms.

In the previous discussion, an attempt has been made to analyse whether there was space for gendered devotion, spirituality, and representation within the religious philosophies and epistemes of Neo-Vaiṣṇava bhakti traditions as propagated by Śaṅkaradeva. Whilst navigating the aforementioned examples, three key aspects can be highlighted: (i) Women were provided space and religious agency to offer worship, practice devotion, and attain emancipation. (ii) In matters associated with devotion, although there existed no overt or explicit sense of gendered exclusion, the nature of inclusion was, however, gendered to a certain extent. The anecdote of Satī Rādhikā can be quoted in this context. Though she hailed from the *nadiyāl* community, her gender and social identity did not act as an impediment in her devotion, but questions related to her chastity did. (iii) Although in Śaṅkaradeva's compositions, it was his voice which was reflected, he did attempt to represent women's voices through Sītā's monologue. However, it is also important to navigate through

[38] Misra, *Sita's Voice*, 33.

[39] Ibid., 38.

[40] Paula Richman, "Introduction: Diversity of the Rāmāyaṇa Tradition," in *Many Rāmāyaṇas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, ed. Paula Richman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 16. In the same anthology of essays edited by Richman, David Shulman in his article mentions with reference to Kampan's Iramavataram, that her response to the trial was that of complaint against Rāma as both her husband and god. She also calls upon the image of Kannaki from the Tamil epic Cilappatikaram. David Shulman, "Fire and Flood: The Testing of Sita in Kampan's Iramavataram," in *Many Rāmāyaṇas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, ed. Paula Richman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 102.

it with caution. This is because both the character of Sītā and the text of *Uttara-kāṇḍa Rāmāyaṇa* cannot be studied or characterised as an archetype.

It is pertinent to understand, while studying a text, that there exists a gap between representations of characters and reflections of social realities. Further, it is also important to contextualise the text in the socio-cultural milieu in which it was composed, rather than locating it in the socio-cultural and epistemological milieu where it was studied. In the context of studying gendered roles, especially of women in Brahmanical texts, Jaya Tyagi mentions that "the texts were written by men, exclusively for men, and are representations of what the authors believed women should be."[41] Tyagi argues that though these texts do portray an accurate representation of women from their period, what makes them a valuable source for studying the alternate precepts in an evolving social structure is their placement in a social context with relation to each other. She further argues that they also act as repositories of understanding how the perceptions of women influenced the actual roles which women were expected to play in early Indian society.[42]

Hence, in order to understand the nuances of the spiritual space, 'voice', and representation, the social milieu will have to be explored, which will be discussed in the subsequent section.

**Women and the Social Context**

বেশ্যাসম হুইবে নাৰী সমস্ত অসতী।
পৰপুৰুষক যাইবে তেজি নিজ পতি॥১১৮ (দ্বাদশ স্কন্ধ)[43]

*vaisyahama hoibe nārī samaste asatī* /
*Parapurusaka jāibe teji nija pati* // 118 (*Dvādaśa skanda*)

All the women become unchaste like prostitutes;
They leave their husbands for other men.

[41] Jaya Tyagi, *Engendering the Early Household: Brahmanical Precepts in the Early Gṛhyasūtras, Middle of the First Millenium B.C.E* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2008), 1.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Sarma, *Axamīyā Sampūrna Srīmadbhāgavata*, 1383.

Śaṅkaradeva's attitude towards women was not unilinear or homogenous. In the *Guru Charita Kathā*, an episode which is a crucial conduit to understanding his perspectives and attitudes towards women, King Naranārāyaṇa sought his *śarana.* In response, Śaṅkaradeva said he would not provide spiritual refuge to three categories of people, including kings, women, and *karmakāṇḍī* (ritualistic) *brāhmaṇas.* The explanation he had provided for not giving *śarana* to women was that they were liars by nature who would not hesitate to lie despite a promise.[44] His outlook or perspectives towards women are also reflected in the literature composed by him.

ঘোৰ নাৰী মায়া সৰ্ব্ব মায়াতে কুৎসিত।
মহা সিদ্ধ মুনিৰো কটাক্ষে হৰে চিত্ত।
দৰশনে কৰে তপ জপ যোগ ভঙ্গ।
জানি জ্ঞানীগণে এড়ে কামিনীৰ সঙ্গ॥ ৫২৮ (হৰমোহন, কীৰ্ত্তন-ঘোষা)[45]

*Ghora nārī-māyā sarbba māyāte kutsita /*
*Mahā siddha muniro kaṭākhe hare citta //*
*Daraśane kare tapa japa joga bhanga /*
*Jāni jnānīgaṇe ere kāminīra sanga //* 528 (*Hara-Mohan*, *Kirtana-ghosa*)

The terrible delusive form of woman is the ugliest of all mayas;
By a single glance the heart of the Siddhas and sages are fascinated.
The very sight of it undermines penances, meditations and yogas.
Hence the wise avoid the company of woman. 528 (*Hara-Mohan*, *Kirtana-ghosa*)[46]

নাৰীৰ স্বভাৱ কহো শুনা পৰীক্ষিত।
কলিত বহুত হৈবে বেশ্যাৰ চৰিত্র॥
লাজ কাজ এৰিবে স্বভাৱে মহা ক্রৰ।
হৈবে ছোট কায়া খাইবে পাৰিবে প্রচুৰ॥১২২ (দ্বাদশ স্কন্ধ)[47]

[44] Neog, *Guru Charita Katha*, 184.
[45] Hazarika, *Kirttana-Ghosha*, 135.
[46] The English translation is by Mahanta, *Kirttana*, 75.
[47] Sarma, *Axamīyā Sampūrna Srīmadbhāgavata*, 1383.

*Nārīr swabhāva kaho śunā Parīkshita /*
*Kalita bahuta hoibe veśyāra caritra //*
*Lāja kāja eribe swabhāve mahā krura /*
*Hoibe sota kāyā khāibe pāribe pracura //* 122 (*Dvādaśa skanda*)

Parīkshit, let me tell you about the nature of women.
During Kali (Age), many will have a prostitute-like character;
They will forfeit all forms of shame and their nature will become cruel.
They will have a small body but will be able to eat a lot.

The aforementioned verses have been quoted from the *Hara-Mohana* chapter of *Kīrtana-ghoshā* and the twelfth canto of *Bhāgavata-purāṅa,* respectively. Through them, two perceptions can be highlighted. The context of the first verse was when Śiva insisted on witnessing the female manifestation of Viṣṇu, i.e. Mohini, and Viṣṇu warned Śiva about the pernicious effect of women. The trope of perilousness brought about by women and female sexuality, especially in the context of shattering men's meditation, self-control, and potency, has been observed in Brahmanical literature. A similar theme has been reiterated in this episode as well. The second verse describes the dystopic ramifications of the Kali Age on the behaviour of women. It describes their sexuality, which would become recalcitrant during this period. Further, a sense of anxiety and apprehension over female sexual appetite can also be highlighted, wherein women's insatiability would induce them to indulge in adulterous liaisons outside the ties of matrimony. Uma Chakravarty has argued that in patriarchal societies, control over female sexuality forms a matter of grave importance in exercising control and maintaining a hierarchical society, thereby leading to the subordination of women.[48] Sherry B. Ortner argues that there exists a certain amount of fear in relation to the loss of control over one's sexuality and its ramifications. According to her, the ideological complex that women's purity is reflective of their families' honour can be found in several societies. It is systematically enforced through control over their social and especially sexual behaviour. She further highlights that

[48] Uma Chakravarty, "Conceptualizing Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State," *Economic and Political Weekly* 28, no. 14 (April 1993): 579, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4399556?read-now=1#page_scan_tab_contents. She argues that such control was especially necessary in the context of maintaining not only patrilineal succession, but also caste purity which is especially unique to Hindu society.

this pattern was discernible across societies and was not confined to a particular society or stratum.[49] In patriarchal societies, there existed a range of control mechanisms in order to ensure control and monitoring over female sexuality, *pativrata-dharma* being one of them. Shalini Shah mentions that in the analysis of the greatness of Indian culture, virtuous women and *pativrata-dharma* held a position of pride.[50] *Pativrata* implied the service role of women. Shah argues that the "*pativrata-dharma* was meant to provide the ideology to school women in this role."[51] This *dharma* was conceived of as self-denying and was based on passive faith and unquestioned devotion to one's husband.[52] Further, the role was not limited to merely his service, since a *pativrata* wife was expected to serve the entire household, which included the husband's entire family, parents, as well as his co-wives.[53] It is noteworthy that it finds reference in Śaṅkaradeva's compositions as well:

স্বামীৰেসে সেৱা কুলস্ত্রীৰ মহা ধর্ম্ম।
পুত্রসৱ পুষিব কৰিয়া গৃহকর্ম্ম॥
যদি কলা জৰা কণা কুজা হোৱে পতি।
তথাপি নেৰিব হেন শাস্ত্রৰ সন্মতি॥১২৪৫ ভাগৱত- দশম স্কন্ধ (আদ্য ভাগ)[54]

*Swāmirehe hewā kulastrīr mahā dharma /*
*Putrasava pushiba kariyā grihakarma //*
*Jadi kalā jarā kaṇā kujā howe pati /*
*Tathāpi neriba hena śāstrar sanmati //* 1245 (*Dasama*)

The service of a husband is the biggest *dharma* of a good woman,
Taking care of the sons is a household duty.
Even if the husband is deaf, old, and possesses a humped back;
The *śāśtras* do not permit leaving (one's husband).

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[49] Sherry B. Ortner, "The Virgin and the State," *Feminist Studies* 4, no. 3 (October 1978): 19, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3177536?read-now=1#page_scan_tab_contents.

[50] Shalini Shah, "On Gender, Wives and 'Pativratās,'" *Social Scientist* 40, nos.5-6 (May-June 2012): 77, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41633811?read-now=1&seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents.

[51] Ibid., 81.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Ibid., 82.

[54] Sarma, *Axamīyā Sampūrna Srīmadbhāgavata*, 855.

The aforementioned verse has been quoted from the tenth canto of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa.* It can be argued that there was a constant emphasis laid on the performance of this particular *dharma.* T. S. Rukmini has analysed bhakti and its concepts in terms of its social relevance to women, using references from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and other forms of recorded history. Rukmini has argued that though women performed better in the bhakti milieu, it functioned only within the metaphor of *pativrata-dharma.*[55] In the context of Neo-Vaiṣṇava bhakti traditions, glimpses of this *dharma* become visible through Śaṅkaradeva's compositions on multiple accounts. They are reflective of not only positioning women within the bhakti canon, but also of the anxieties associated with exercising control over their movements and behaviour.

Hugh Urban is of the opinion that Śaṅkaradeva's attitude towards women was influenced by the religious contexts of the times, especially of his opposition to the Śākta traditions. Urban argues that his opinions were formed in response to the central rites of the Assamese Śākta traditions' celebration of female sexuality and the power of sexual union. Hence, whilst he attributed spiritual authority to women, he also warned about their dangerous powers as sexual beings.[56] It is noteworthy that the trope of associating women with evil influence is a common thread amongst several spiritual seekers. Another aspect which is important to note while discussing Śaṅkaradeva's attitude towards women is the knowledge system of which he was a part. The bhakti traditions as propagated by him did not develop in a vacuum. They were a part of the broader traditions of intertextuality and interactions within multiple religious matrices. Aparna Mahanta highlights the evolution of the Bhūyān community in close proximity to Brahman families post their migration. The association influenced patterns of social relations and rituals, which became apparent through rituals and social practices such as birth and funerary rites. She further highlights examples from biographical literature to explicate the observance of caste and gender-based practices like pre-puberty

[55] T. S. Rukmini, "Bhakti, The Bhāgavata Purāna and the Empowerment of Women," *Journal for the Study of Religion* 8, no. 1 (March 1995): 55, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24764147?read-now=1&seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents.

[56] Hugh Urban, "Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva," (2012): 5, https://www.academia.edu/10092829/_Sankaradeva_and_Madhavadeva_.

marriages, valuing sons as continuators of the line of succession, amongst others.[57]

## Conclusion

The two central questions which this article studied were the outlook of Śaṅkaradeva on women and the implications of the message of bhakti for them. It has become imperative to cogitate on the spiritual agencies which bhakti provided, and the space and representation accorded within its realm. Accordingly, three examples were explored, each of which was positioned within Neo-Vaiṣṇava bhakti philosophies as propagated by Śaṅkaradeva. Without essentialising or trivialising, it can be argued that women were accorded space within the realm of bhakti in terms of devotion. They were not explicitly excluded on the basis of their gender and were given spiritual space to not only worship Kṛṣṇa but also attain emancipation. Thus, so far as gender-based devotion is considered, women were not only included, but were also subjected to spiritual equality. However, the inclusion in itself was gendered and was subject to factors like caste and mechanisms of exercising control like *pativratā-dharma* and other issues, which were inherently patriarchal in nature. *Pativratā-dharma* represented several interlinked notions, including that of chastity. Shalini Shah argues that in a society where notions of chastity are important, it is logical for that society to possess certain social norms associated with its testing.[58] In this context, examples of Rādhikā, verses highlighting the importance of *pativratā-dharma* and Sītā can be quoted. In such a scenario, it becomes pertinent to ask whether, despite providing spiritual agency, representation, and voice to women in Neo-Vaiṣṇavism, the outlook of Śaṅkaradeva and bhakti teachings was gendered and patriarchal. The answer to it can be contextualised within the contours of the society in which he propagated his message of bhakti. The society functioned by patriarchal norms, especially the Brahmanical worldview, which were discernible through rituals, functions, and prejudices. They were both practised as well as can be observed in the anecdotes of biographical literature and in Śaṅkaradeva's compositions.

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[57] Aparna Mahanta, "Women in History: Gender, Religion, State and Society in Medieval Assam," in *Religious Tradition and Social Practices in Assam*, ed. D. Nath (Guwahati: DVS Publishers, 2016), 111-112.

[58] Shah, "On Gender," 83.

Shandip Saha highlights that "bhakti communities did not live in a social vacuum."[59] Hence, it becomes pertinent to understand that a community cannot be studied primarily in terms of literary and intellectual history.[60] The regional factors played an equally important role, since the religious teachings had to be contextualised within the society in which they were propagated. These social and cultural contexts had an impact on religious traditions and philosophies, which in turn led to the creation of a devotional community of believers to start with — a process and development which was going to have considerable political significance in the future.

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[59] Shandip Saha, "The Movement of Bhakti along a North-West Axis: Tracing the History of the Pustimārg between the Sixteenth and Nineteenth Centuries." *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 11, no. 3 (December 2007): 313, https://www.academia.edu/9013082/The_Movement_of_Bhakti_along_a_North_West_Axis_Tracing_the_History_of_the_Pu%E1%B9%A3%E1%B9%ADim%C4%81rg_between_the_Sixteenth_and_Nineteenth_Centuries.

[60] Ibid.

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# Educational Initiatives of the Dalitudhar Sabha in Delhi, 1921-1947

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*The paper examines the educational initiatives of the Arya Samaj-led Dalitudhar Sabha among Dalit communities. While existing historiography has explored the various roles played by the Arya Samaj, its educational efforts among Dalits have received only cursory scholarly attention. Furthermore, few studies have examined the reasons and circumstances that led Dalits to associate with the Arya Samaj. This paper explores both the vision of Arya Samaj-run educational institutions and the perspectives of the Dalits who chose to engage with them. It is based on archival reports, census records, reports of the Dalitudhar Sabha, the vernacular periodical Chand, and correspondence between Jatav leaders. By reading these mainstream sources "against the archival grain," the paper seeks to recover valuable insights into the experiences of Dalit actors whose written records, pamphlets, magazines, newspapers, and other vernacular sources remain limited and scattered. It further portrays Dalits as autonomous and conscious agents through the case study of Sohanlal Shastri Vidyavachaspati, moving beyond the dominant narrative of unilinear ideological affiliation and highlighting the coexistence of multiple associations. The paper argues that the first generation of educated Dalit leaders made some of the most significant contributions to the educational advancement of Dalit communities.*

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**Keywords**: Social reform movements, Dalitudhar, Arya Samaj, Education, Delhi.

## Introduction

This paper situates the educational initiatives of the Arya Samaj-led Dalitudhar Sabha in the western extension area of colonial Delhi, particularly in the localities of Rehgarpura and Karol Bagh, and Multani Dhanda in Paharganj, which were predominantly inhabited by Dalit communities. The educational activities of the Dalitudhar Sabha are examined within the broader context of anti-colonial social reform movements and their interactions with other agents, such as Christian missionaries and colonial authorities. The paper argues that educational opportunities available to Dalits in colonial Delhi were provided primarily by non-state actors, especially Christian missionaries and, subsequently, the Arya Samaj. The colonial state

made only a limited contribution towards Dalit education. Although Delhi Municipality began opening a small number of schools during the late second decade of the twentieth century, responsibility for educational amelioration was largely left to non-state agencies. Schools were established in Dalit bastis and segregated localities, and a few received grants-in-aid from the colonial government. Nevertheless, the educational condition of Dalits remained pitiable. By examining both the structural limitations embedded within reformist institutions such as the Arya Samaj-led Dalitudhar Sabha and the ambivalent attitude of the colonial state, this paper seeks to explain the limited success achieved in reducing educational inequalities among Dalit communities.

This paper further shows that the first generation of educated Dalit leaders played a significant role in advancing educational opportunities within their communities. This argument is illustrated through a case study of Sohanlal Shastri Vidyavachaspati, who received his education through Arya Samaj institutions and later became a prominent teacher in an Arya Samaj-run school while maintaining ideological ties with B. R. Ambedkar. His life demonstrates that Dalit ideological leanings were often characterised by the coexistence of multiple associations and influences. The case further suggests that Arya Samaj-led educational initiatives were not entirely unsuccessful. By producing teachers, activists, and *pracharaks* from within Dalit communities, these institutions contributed to the emergence of the first generation of educated Dalit leadership in colonial Delhi.

A note on terminology: This paper employs several terms to designate people at the bottom rungs of society. The terms such as Chamars, Chuhras, Mehtars, and Bhangis are used in the paper as they appear in colonial reports and sources in their respective historical contexts. With time, ex-untouchables adopted self–proclaimed categories like Jatavs and Balmikis and eventually came to be recognised by several other names such as Harijans, Depressed Classes, Dalits, and Scheduled Castes. Thus, in this paper, different kinds of names are used to depict the heterogeneity of the communities on the margins. However, an attempt has been made to refrain, wherever possible, from the usage of derogatory words and use the most widely acceptable and academically more suitable term, Dalit.

**Beginning of the Arya Samaj's Initiatives for Dalits in Delhi**

The Arya Samaj movement reached Delhi in the latter half of the nineteenth century. In 1914, a circular was issued advising local Arya Samaj leaders to move beyond the 'touchable' castes and extend their reach to include the Chamars and Chuhras living in the segregated colonies of Delhi.[1] In Delhi, there was a significant difference between the College and *Gurukul* groups within the Arya Samaj. While both factions drew followers from the Bania, Khatri, Kayastha, and Jat communities, the Gurukul group included members from Shudra backgrounds. Notable figures included Lala Ram Saran Das, a Lahiry (the Sudra caste among blacksmiths), and the ironmonger Seth Raghumal Lohia. Due to their own social backgrounds, the Gurukul group was more sympathetic towards the marginalised and actively worked for the upliftment of the downtrodden.

In 1916, Delhi became politically active by opening a Home Rule League movement branch that produced several significant leaders, like Asaf Ali and Annie Besant, along with key figures from the Arya Samaj's Gurukul group, such as Swami Shraddhanand, Pandit Indra Vidyavachaspati, and Subhadra Devi. They came to play a crucial role in shaping the city's political, religious, and social life. Consequently, the deplorable conditions of Dalits gained recognition with the emergence of several leaders from the Gurukul group. In the early twentieth century, Swami Shraddhanand, having become a well-known figure in the city's politics, began to focus his attention on significant social and educational concerns.[2]

In 1921, when Swami Shraddhanand came to Delhi, he was deeply disappointed by the All-India Congress Committee's failure to take decisive action to address Dalits' plight. He wrote a letter to Mahatma Gandhi and Vithalbhai Patel, the then General Secretary of the AICC, questioning them about the Congress programme. He pointed out that while the programme emphasised achieving Swaraj through the boycott of foreign goods and the

[1] "Miscellaneous Confidential Papers," note by G. F. de Montmorency, Chief Commissioner's Assistant, DSA, Confidential File 25 (1914), 25 November 1912.

[2] Swami Shraddhanand occupied a unique position that he was entitled to as the "uncrowned king" of the capital city. "Proposal to Munshi Ram alias Swami Shraddhanand and Dr. Ansari," NAI, Home Political, nos. 268–273, pt. B, May 1919.

removal of untouchability, it had completely ignored the condition laid down at the Nagpur Session of the Indian National Congress—namely, that Swaraj could be attained within twelve months only if the rights of the Depressed Classes were secured.[3] He subsequently resigned from the Congress for the sake of the six and a half crore untouchables. After resigning from the Congress, Shraddhanand declared his intention to devote himself fully to the work of the Shri Shraddhanand Dalitudhar Sabha (hereafter, SDS), an organisation operating under the aegis of the Arya Samaj, of which he served as president. He argued that it was the SDS that had been doing appreciable work, instead of the Congress, for "the spiritual well-being, religious protection, socio-economic uplift, and educational betterment of the Depressed classes."[4] It was through the SDS that Shraddhanand aimed to educate Dalits and, by offering opportunities for educational, social, and economic advancement, to reclaim and retain them within the fold of the Hindu community. Shraddhanand's support and sympathy helped the organisation to widen the sphere of its activities.

The SDS organisation undertook upliftment activities from its headquarters in the capital city's western extension area, which had a predominantly lower-caste population, and was one of the central areas for Christian missionaries' work. It soon became an important centre of Arya Samaj-led initiatives for the city's Dalits, along with Shahadhra, Samiapore, and Khera. One of the main reasons that Arya Samaj leaders worked for Dalits was to counter the growing influence of Christian missionaries and Islam in Delhi, especially after the Morley-Minto reforms. Subsequently, in 1923, Shraddhanand set up the 'Shuddhi Sabha' in Agra; its branch was then moved to Lucknow and eventually shifted to Delhi, and *Shuddhi Samachar* magazine, edited by Chidanand Swami, was introduced as its mouthpiece. For Shraddhanand, the

[3] Letter by Shraddhanand Sanyasi to Mahatma Gandhi, 9 September 1921, and Shraddhanand Sanyasi to Vithalbhai Patel, 23 May 1922, AICC Papers, file no. 10 (1922–23), Prime Minister Memorial Museum and Library (hereafter PMML).

[4] Vijay Prashad, *Untouchable Freedom: A Social History of a Dalit Community* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), 81; Arun Kumar, "The 'Untouchable Schools': American Missionaries, Hindu Social Reformers and the Educational Dreams of Labouring Dalits in Colonial North India," *South Asian Studies* 42, no. 5 (2019): 823–44. According to both authors, the Dalitudhar Sabha was founded in 1921. However, according to *The Liberator*, 5 August 1926, the Dalitudhar Sabha was established in 1913. In 1921, the Sabha secured the patronage of Swami Shraddhanand and the financial support of Seth Jugal Kishore Birla.

work of Dalit upliftment and reclamation, or the *Shuddhification* of wayward Hindus, was to go hand in hand with the incorporation of Dalits into an acceptable mould of Hinduism and vegetarianism. In 1926, Swami Shraddhanand wrote a provocative piece titled *Hindu Sangathan: Saviour of the Dying Race*.[5] He was worried by the prospect of the shrinking number of Hindus and the threat posed by the emergence of Dalits as an autonomous political force. For Swami Shraddhanand, removing untouchability was also essential for strengthening the Hindu community and the nation.

In Delhi, some of the earliest steps taken by Arya Samaj leaders under the banner of the SDS focused on resolving day-to-day socio-economic and religious concerns of the Dalits, in addition to taking up educational initiatives. The first task undertaken by Swami Shraddhanand was to lead a procession of Dalits to protest against the denial of access to water from the Angori well near Ajmere Gate. After initial reluctance, Dalits were eventually allowed to use the well, marking a significant achievement in improving their conditions. Three activists and followers of Swami Shraddhanand– Dr. Sukhdev, Narayan Dutt, and Lala Gyanchand– came forward as local Arya Samajis to work for Dalitudhar in Delhi. Dr. Sukhdev, who had previously worked for the upliftment of the downtrodden in Gurukul Kangri, became the Dalitudhar Sabha's secretary in Delhi and contributed significantly to securing equal rights for Dalits. The leather shoemakers (Chamars) faced contempt from orthodox Hindus due to their occupation and were adopting Christianity in large numbers to seek respect, dignity, and schooling. To protect Dalits from the wrath of orthodox Hindus and prevent them from falling into the Christian missionaries' fold under the influence of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, Narayan Dutt opened one of the first upper-caste shoe shops in Delhi to enhance the acceptability of their work. Although he faced disdain and ultimately had to sell his shop, his efforts inspired upper-caste Hindus to open shoe shops to resell the shoes bought from the Chamars.

Maulvi Ahmad Masih, a blind Christian preacher, gave a detailed account of Arya Samaj's work in Delhi, noting that it was the duty of the Arya Samaj's *updeshaks* (preachers) to go into the Chamars bastis (localities) every morning and evening to perform the ceremony of purification (*shuddhi*), read mantras,

[5] Swami Shraddhanand, *Hindu Sangathan: Saviour of the Dying Race* (Delhi, 1926).

and burn sweet scents. They opened several schools for boys from disadvantaged backgrounds, along with five schools for girls belonging to similar social communities. This resulted in the closure of girls' schools run by Christian missionaries. He noted that many bhajans and hymns were taught to women and girls, both in their homes and schools, to discourage Christian missionary work. An example he cited was "Jesus is not [the] Son of God", a part of the lessons taught in the newly established Arya Samaj schools, along with the commandments of Dayanand and the Arya catechism.[6] Another significant issue faced by Dalits was forced labour or *begar*.[7] Arya Samaj leaders provided legal assistance to victims of forced labour and protected many of them from harassment by the Zamindars, and they did this by selecting *pracharaks* (involved in missionary work of Arya Samaj) from amongst the sweeper, scavenging, and shoe-making communities.

This paper draws on Sudha Pai's work, titled *Dalit Assertion*, which argues that the seeds of political consciousness among the Dalits were sown during the colonial period, and matured with democratisation in the post-Independence period.[8] However, this study departs from Sudha Pai's emphasis on only three major ideological strands during the colonial period—Gandhian, Ambedkarite, and Dravidian—and examines the role of Arya Samaj educational initiatives. The paper suggests that even while Sudha Pai highlights limitations in Gandhian efforts that delayed the rise of autonomous Dalit agents in North India, she overlooks how Arya Samaj initiatives, which predated Gandhian endeavours, fostered a new generation of Dalit leaders in North India as early as the 1920s. As Ramnarayan Rawat has demonstrated, a strong Dalit-led movement emerged in the 1920s in Uttar Pradesh (U.P.), exemplified by the Adi-Hindu movement under Swami Achhutanand and Chandrika Prasad Jigyasu, both of whom were initially associated with the Arya Samaj. He further demonstrates that Dalits were not passively drawn into Hindu communities; rather, the ideals of the Arya Samaj appealed to the *Chamar* community because they offered a path toward emancipation from

[6] *Delhi Mission News*, Quarterly Paper, October, Vol. VII, No. 12, 1915, 143.

[7] Swami Ramananda Sanyasi, secretary, *Annual Report on the Educational Work of the All India Shraddhanand Dalitodhar Sabha for the Year Ending March 1928* (Delhi: Hindustan Times Press, 1928), 15.

[8] Sudha Pai, *Dalit Assertion and the Unfinished Democratic Revolution: The Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2002).

social stigma. He further added that the entire generation of Dalit activists in U.P., like Pandit Suderlal Sagar, Ramnarayan Yadvendu and Babu Ramcharan, studied in Arya Samaj schools. He also shows that Dalits played a crucial role in the Arya Samaj-led initiatives. For instance, Swami Achhutanand joined the Arya Samaj in 1905 and taught until 1918 and was an active participant in its Shuddhi movement.[9] Interestingly, as noted by Arun Kumar, Dalits were not completely 'submissive' in their relationship with the Arya Samaj. Instead, they often utilised the Arya Samaj to fulfil their own aspirations for social mobility. Kumar shows that because the Arya Samaj feared losing Dalits to Christian missionaries, they were often forced to concede to Dalit demands.[10] Consequently, Dalits leveraged the influence of Arya Samaj officials to claim wages for unpaid forced labour, settle disputes with landlords, gain access to government schools, and report landlords' violence and torture to the police.

The paper builds on Rawat's and Arun Kumar's understanding of Dalits' consciousness, and further develops upon structural-Marxist scholars and resistance theorists' perspective on the role of education to maintain the status quo or facilitate emancipation, though scholars like Althusser and Bourdieu argued that educational spaces are not liberatory and can reproduce inequalities.[11] This paper draws its core from Jyotirao Phule and more nuanced views of B. R. Ambedkar. Although they acknowledged that education could embody both discriminatory and emancipatory elements, they firmly believed that education rooted in critical pedagogy had the potential to destabilise existing power structures. The important works of Geetha B. Nambissan, Philip Constable, and Eleanor Zelliot have shown that humiliating school experiences have led the first generation of educated untouchable leaders to

[9] Ramnarayan Rawat, *Reconsidering Untouchability: Chamars and Dalit history in North India* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 141

[10] Arun Kumar, "The 'Untouchable Schools': American Missionaries, Hindu Social Reformers and the Educational Dreams of Labouring Dalits in Colonial North India," *South Asian Studies* 42, no. 5 (2019): 823–44.

[11] Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes towards an Investigation," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (Delhi: Aakar Books, 2006), 133–54; Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1977).

undertake initiatives to open educational opportunities for their community.[12] Similarly, according to Sudha Pai, an educated generation of Dalits can produce "middle-class activism".[13] Furthermore, Chinna Rao Yagati, Jana Tschurenev, and Sumeet Mhaskar have demonstrated that while the colonial state and non-state agencies provided only limited opportunities, these were sufficient to facilitate the emergence of Dalit leaders who took on the responsibility of educating their own communities.[14]

Ramnarayan Rawat's and a few other existing works on Arya Samaj have studied its role for Dalits as producing active ideologues, such as Swami Achhutananda in United Provinces, or Mangoo Ram in Punjab, who later formed separate Dalit organisations by severing ties with Arya Samaj.[15] In contrast, Vijay Kumar has been able to show the coexistence of several contradicting ideologies embraced by Chaudhary Mulkiram, who came in contact with Arya Samaj, Gandhi, and Ambedkar, without abandoning any of these influences.[16] Earlier writings have largely overlooked the question of Dalit autonomy in their interaction with non-state agencies. These works, by focusing exclusively on Dalits' agency, have overshadowed the role played by non-state agencies, including the Arya Samaj, for Dalits. This paper, therefore, engages with both the perspectives of the Arya Samaj and the Dalit

[12] Geetha B. Nambissan, "Caste and the Politics of the Early 'Public' in Schooling: Dalit Struggle for an Equitable Education," *Contemporary Education Dialogue* 17, no. 2 (2020): 126–54; Philip Constable, "Sitting on the School Verandah: The Ideology and Practice of 'Untouchable' Educational Protest in Late Nineteenth-Century Western India," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 37, no. 4 (2000): 383–422; Eleanor Zelliot, "Experiments in Dalit Education: Maharashtra, 1850–1947," in *Education and the Disprivileged: Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century India*, ed. S. Bhattacharya (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2002), 35–49; Eleanor Zelliot, "Dalit Initiatives in Education, 1880–1892," in *New Perspectives in the History of Indian Education*, ed. P. V. Rao (New Delhi, 2004), 45–67.

[13] Pai, *Dalit Assertion and the Unfinished Democratic Revolution*.

[14] Chinna Rao Yagati, "Education and Identity Formation among Dalits in Colonial Andhra," in *Education and the Disprivileged: Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century India*, ed. S. Bhattacharya (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2002), 84–122; Jana Tschurenev and Sumeet Mhaskar, "'Wake Up for Education': Colonialism, Social Transformation, and the Beginnings of the Anti-Caste Movement in India," *Paedagogica Historica* (2021): 630–48.

[15] Rawat, *Reconsidering Untouchability*; Ronki Ram, "Untouchability, Dalit Consciousness, and the Ad Dharm Movement in Punjab," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 38 (2004): 323–49.

[16] Vijay Kumar, "Life of a Dalit Magistrate: Ideologies and Politics in Dalit Life in North India, 1920–1954," *Modern Asian Studies* 57, no. 4 (2023): 1300–1331.

community to understand the efforts undertaken to mitigate educational inequalities.

The paper has been divided into three sections that underscore the educational initiatives of the Dalitudhar Sabha, its limitations and the role of Dalits associated with Arya Samaj-led initiatives. Unlike figures such as Swami Achhutananda in Uttar Pradesh and Mangoo Ram in Punjab—who broke ties with the Arya Samaj and founded the Adi Hindu and Adi Dharm movements, respectively—the case of Sohanlal Shastri Vidyavachaspati reveals a different trajectory, and his involvement within Hindu reformism of Arya Samaj resonates with Michael Apple's case study of Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO), a South Africans organisation associated with a white dominant Bradley Institute. Apple argues that Black association with the Institute was a strategic move to obtain rights and opportunities for the upliftment of their community.[17]

## Dalitudhar Sabha and Education for Dalits

One of the main goals of the Dalitudhar Sabha, or the Hindu Depressed Classes Mission, was to ameliorate Dalits' condition through education. Education was given utmost importance because, as the Dalitudhar Sabha noted, children of the Depressed classes were not permitted to study in common schools. Sometimes, the teachers of such schools were 'terrified' to admit them and consequently turned them away, sealing the fates of the blooming children of the Dalit communities. Until 1916, neither the government nor municipal local bodies had taken any direct initiative for improving the educational conditions of the Dalits, except for the usual grant-in-aid to the schools maintained by missionaries in Delhi.[18] Several vernacular newspapers in North India reported the deplorable educational conditions of Dalits. *Pratap* reports on 12 February 1923, Mahashay Sant Ramji's note that "the Government [School] for Chamar boys appointed a Brahman teacher

[17] Michael Apple, "Between Good Sense and Bad Sense: Race, Class, and Learning from *Learning to Labour*," in *Learning to Labour in New Times*, ed. N. Dolby and G. Dimitriadis (New York: Routledge, 2004), 144–66.

[18] DSA, CC (Education), B Progs., file no. 169, 1916.

recently. On his arrival, Brahman[s], Kshatriyas, and others boycotted the teacher."[19]

**Table 1: List of Arya Samaj institutions in Delhi**

| No. | Name of the branch | Place | Name of the institution |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Arya Samaj – Delhi | Gali Raja Kidar Nath, Chaori Bazar | 1. Arya Girls School, (Middle) Chaori Bazar<br>2. D.N. High School Boarding House.<br>3. Arya Orphanage, Pataudi House<br>4. D.N. Branch School, Sadar Bazar<br>5. D.N. Branch School, Esplanade Road.<br>6. D.N. Branch School, Bazar Sita Ram. |
| 2 | Arya Sarvadeshik Sabha | Esplanade Road | 1. Jyoti Pathshala, Esplanade Road.<br>2. Library |
| 3 | Arya Samaj Bazar Sita Ram | Koocha Shahidi Qasam, Bazar Sita Ram | 1. DAV High School, Daryaganj<br>2. DAV High School Boarding House<br>3. DAV Branch School, Katra Khushal Rai. |
| 4. | Arya Samaj, Sabzi Mand | Sabzi Mandi | Arya Girls School |
| 5 | Arya Naya Bans | Naya Bans | Primary School |
| 6 | Dalitudhar Sabha | Shraddhanand Basti | The following schools are run for untouchables by this Sabha in Delhi province at Khera, Badli, Somepur, Shahdra, Paharganj, Basti Rehgarh, and Pahari Dhiraj. A piece of land for a model village for untouchables has |

[19] *Pratap,* 12 February 1923, cited in *B. R. Ambedkar, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches,* vol. 5 (Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1989), 40.

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | recently been granted by the government near Paharganj Ganj, free of cost. |

**Source**: List of Arya Samaj institutions in Delhi, file no. 7, 1928, DSA, Education Department

Similarly, Swami Shraddhanand wrote in his Urdu newspaper *Tej*, dated 11 April 1924, that he visited a nationalist school and got to know the school had enrolled only three Dalit children, and even they were made to sit in the verandah outside the school. Swami Shraddhanand asked the manager of the school to make the children sit inside their respective classrooms. However, by the next day, the school benches were empty, and the school had been shut.[20] Consequently, Swami Shraddhanand and Ramananda Sanyasi undertook the task of improving the educational conditions of Dalits in their hands. The gradual growth in Dalitudhar Sabha's influence, and intensification of its educational work amongst Dalits and other communities of the city can also be seen from the drastic rise in its formal members from 650 in 1911 to 12,000 in 1921, and reaching around 50,000 by 1931.[21]

According to the 1921 Census report, sweepers and scavengers constituted the largest group among Christians, with 2,429 Chuhras adopting Christianity out of a total of 8,533 Indian Christians in Delhi.[22] In 1931, there was a significant drop in the prevalence of Christianity among Chamars (from 9.36 per cent to 5.9 per cent) and Chuhras (from 16.12 per cent to 13.46 per cent).[23] The decline in the number of Christians among the lower castes may be attributed to the growing activities of the Dalitudhar Sabha. As noted in the account of Maulvi Ahmad Masih discussed above, many members of the Arya Samaj sought to attract downtrodden communities by providing educational opportunities and other welfare facilities. The Dalitudhar Sabha opened various schools for Dalits, especially sweepers, who were largely ignored by society. Arya Samaj

[20] *Tej*, 11 April 1924, cited in ibid., 40.

[21] Donald W. Ferrell, *Delhi, 1911–1922: Society and Politics in the New Imperial Capital of India* (Canberra: Australian National University, 1969), 107.

[22] L. Middleton, I.C.S., and S. M. Jacob, I.C.S., *Census of India, 1921*, vol. 15, pt. 1, *Punjab and Delhi* (Lahore: Civil and Military Gazette Press, 1922), table 15, pt. 2.

[23] Ahmad Hasan Khan, M.A., K.S., Superintendent of Census Operations, *Census of India, 1931*, vol. 16, *Delhi* (Lahore: Civil and Military Gazette Press, 1933), table 17, vii.

opposed separate schools, believing that educating Dalits alongside higher castes would help them become refined. However, prejudice against Dalits was deeply entrenched. Jugal Kishore Khanna noted that Bhangis and Chamars could not attend the same school as caste Hindus. He mentioned that the Delhi Municipal Committee started two or three separate schools in areas with significant Dalit populations, such as Ajmere Gate, Sadar Bazar, and Karol Bagh.[24] Arya Samaj also supported the educational upliftment of Dalits in these areas. A report from Delhi provides a list of educational institutions opened by Dalitudhar Sabha for Dalits in places like Khera, Badli Samepur, Shahdara, Paharganj, Basti Rehgarh, and Pahari Dhiraj in Karol Bagh.[25]

There was a gradual increase in the number of schools established by the Dalitudhar Sabha in Delhi for Dalits, compared to the Delhi Municipality and Christian Missionaries, as indicated in Table 2 below:

**Table 2: Number of Schools opened by Christian Missionaries, Arya Samaj, and Delhi Municipality and total enrolment of Depressed classes pupils**

| Year | Schools of Christian Missionaries (B. M. Sand S. P. G.) | Arya Samaj's Dalitudhar Sabha | Delhi Municipality | Total no. of scholars/ pupils enrolled from the depressed class | Remarks |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1917-1922 | 12 | - | 1 | | -- |
| 1927-32 | - | - | - | 2,905 | There is no specific statistical data available for the period from 1922 -32. But other reports indicate that Dalitudhar Sabha opened several new schools. |

[24] Jugal Kishore Khanna, Oral Transcript no. 177, PMML.

[25] DSA, CC (Education), B Progs., file no. 7, 1928.

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1927-32 | 8 | 2 | 3 | 2,375 | -- |
| 1933 | 8 | 2 | 3 | 2,342 | -- |
| 1934 | 5 | 6 | 2 | 2,329 | -- |
| 1935 | 5 | 6 | 2 | 2,291 | -- |
| 1935-36 | 4 | 9 | 2 | 2,050 | -- |

**Source**: The figures are from the *Quinquennial Reports* compiled by J. C. Chatterjee, Superintendent of Education, and *Annual Report on the progress of Education in the Delhi province* from 1917 onwards, published by the Government of India Press. Calcutta.

**Table 3: Statement of Pathshalas existing on 31 March 1928**

| **Name of Pathshala in Delhi province** | **Enrolment on 30th March 1928** | **Number of trained teachers** | **Untrained teachers** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Paharganj | 60 | 1 | 1 |
| Pahari Dhiraj (night school) | 55 | 1 | 1 |
| Basti Rehgar | 40 | -- | 1 |
| Shahdra | 47 | -- | 1 |
| Shamaipur | 53 | 1 | 1 |
| Khaira | 36 | 1 | -- |

**Source**: Swami Ramananda Sanyasi secretary. *Annual Report on the Educational Work of the All India Shraddhanand Dalitodhar Sabha for the year ending March 1928*. (Delhi: Printed at the Hindustan Times Press, 1928), Appendix (E)

In the various Arya Vedic Pathshalas opened by the SDS (Table 3), a wide range of subjects were taught, including "geography, 3Rs [reading, writing and elementary arithmetic], vegetarianism, cleanliness, morality, nationalism, religion, and Hindi."[26] It was an acknowledged fact that the Sabha was in favour of teaching Hindi, and most students couldn't read that language, but the Sabha worked out its scheme amicably. According to its report, it never forced students from other schools to read Hindi. The Sabha had arranged

[26] Swami Ramananda Sanyasi, secretary, *Annual Report on the Educational Work of the All India Shraddhanand Dalitodhar Sabha for the Year Ending March 1928* (Delhi: Hindustan Times Press, 1928), 21–25.

classes for Urdu as well. However, it lacked teachers trained in Urdu and, as a result, students' performance remained poor. Sabha-led Vedic Pathshalas also held sessions in sports and games. Almost all teachers working under the Sabha were trained in scouting. They learned the value of sports, games, and drills. The boys played *kabbadi* and other desi games and did desi *kasrat* (exercises). They also played football at Shamaipur and Ghaziabad[27]. Poor boys were also provided with books, slates *(takhties*) and articles of stationery.[28]

The strong desire for learning among children from lower-caste backgrounds can be seen in one such case study of Ulgoo's aspiration. In May 1927, *Chand*, a leading Hindi journal of colonial north India, published its *Achhut Ank* (special issue on 'untouchables') under the editorship of Pt. Nandkishor Tiwari. It includes the story of a sweeper/Mehtar boy inclined to study. Despite social norms that forbade his education, he fulfilled his aspirations with the help of a sympathetic teacher and subsequently assisted other Mehtar boys in their schooling.

> In the corner of a town lived a Mehtar (sweeper) named Sitau. He had a son, Ulgoo, who was curious and always eager to learn new things. One day, he went for a walk in the city and heard a Pandit chanting excerpts from Ramayana in a Hanuman temple. He felt immense pleasure listening to the offerings of prayers from a distance. He requested his father to make some arrangements for his schooling so that he could read the Ramayana daily; however, his father reminded him that they were *bhangis*, and no one would allow them to read. Sitau further told his son that even a discussion of their desire to study would give an invitation to society's abuse and disgust. Ulgoo did not give up. The next day, he went to the same place; after the Pandit completed his prayer, he requested the Pandit to teach him. Pandit rudely replied, 'You cannot even touch the text, let alone read it.' Afterwards, Ulgoo went to many Mahashya and pleaded with them to teach him how to read. But it was of no avail. All of them shunned him. He started visiting Pathshala, having heard about a generous Pandit. But nobody paid any heed to him. Finally, he met a Pandit from a Pathshala, and he

[27] Ibid.,13.
[28] Ibid.,15.

> was known for being very sympathetic to the cause of schooling Dalit children. He began giving lessons to Ulgoo. Soon, Ulgoo started reading Ramayana all by himself and opened a small school for teaching other boys of the Mehtar community.[29]

This narrative reveals the prevailing societal attitudes toward the children of the Mehtar community during the colonial period. It also depicts the profound urge and conviction of Dalit children to seek an education. Despite being repeatedly rebuked by various Mahashyas, Ulgoo remained undeterred in his resolution to educate himself. His eventual success and his decision to open a small Pathshala highlight how individual perseverance facilitated broader literacy and learning for other Mehtar children.

Arya Samaj also undertook initiatives to educate girls, including those from Dalit backgrounds. Madhu Kishwar, in her study of Swami Shraddhanand's daughter, notes that the Arya Samaj was alarmed by missionary attempts to Christianise her, which prompted the establishment of Kanya Pathshala (girls' school) to ensure that the daughters were educated within their own cultural framework.[30] Charu Gupta further observes that various reformist groups initiated several programs to turn women into better wives and mothers. Through an analysis of *Chand* magazine, Charu Gupta has depicted male anxieties about how much, and what should be taught to women, to prevent them from becoming westernised *memsahibs*.[31] In its November 1923 edition, *Chand* magazine's editor wrote about the opening of a Kanya Gurukul inaugurated in Delhi by the generous and charitable Seth Raghumal, who donated one lakh rupees.

At the inauguration, Swami Shraddhanand and other Arya Samajis were also present. The purpose of the Kanya Gurukul was to educate girls in accordance with traditional values, equipping them with domestic skills and the ability to

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[29] Nand Kishore Tiwari, ed., "Ulgoo ka Vidya Padhna," *Achhut Ank*, *Chand* 8, no. 1 (May 1927): 40. Originally published in Hindi; translation mine.

[30] Madhu Kishwar, "Arya Samaj and Women's Education: Kanya Mahavidyalaya, Jalandhar," *Economic and Political Weekly* 21, no. 17, Review of Women's Studies (April 26, 1986): W9–W24.

[31] Charu Gupta, "Women, Gender and Sexuality: Changing Historiographies of Colonial India—A Bibliographical Essay," *Studies in People's History* 7, no. 2 (2020): 192–204.

carry out social work. It was further stated that the education provided would be completely distinct from European education and aligned with traditional values, ancient civilisation, and Indian ethics. Under the leadership of its first principal, Kumari Vidyavati Seth, the school initially enrolled forty girls, with plans for rapid expansion. However, separate arrangements were maintained for the education of girls from lower-caste backgrounds.[32]

Arya Samaj also took a keen interest in the education of Dalit girls, recognising that female literacy lagged behind in all communities, particularly among Dalits, where girls were often restricted to domestic labour. In 1929, Arya Kanya Pathshala was established at Basti Harphool Singh, Pahari Dhiraj, with five students from the Raigar community. This initiative, led by Mahatma Narain Swami, became a central institution for the Raigar community and was later moved to Beadanpura in 1936. There was a striking difference in how Dalit sub-castes approached gendered education. In the Balmiki community, while boys were encouraged to attend school, girls' education was often viewed as useless. The prevailing sentiment was that girls were destined for child-rearing and domestic duties, or would inevitably be recruited into sweeping and sanitation work.[33]

In contrast, the Raigar community placed equal importance on the education of both boys and girls. In the pre-Independence period, with the help of Arya Samajis, a school known as Arya Kanya Vidyalaya was opened for Raigar girls. Soon, members of the Raigar community took over the school and its administration. The school grew from a primary institution to a senior higher secondary school. Its enrollment increased from five students in 1929 to 800 by 2002. Many alumnae achieved significant social and political success; for example, Shrimati Shakuntla Pawadia became the school's principal, and Shrimati Sundarvati Naval Prabhakar became the first Raigar woman councillor of the Delhi Mahanagar Parishad, and later a Member of Parliament representing Karol Bagh.

[32] Ramrakh Singh Sahgal, "Kanya Gurukul," *Chand* (Delhi, November 1923).

[33] M. Karlekar, *Poverty and Women's Work: A Study of Sweeper Women in Delhi* (Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1982).

**Limitations of the Dalitudhar Sabha's Initiatives**

Despite several crucial initiatives taken by SDS members to improve educational and socio-economic conditions, these efforts remained mostly unsuccessful in addressing educational inequalities among Dalit communities. Arya Samaj schools and their other initiatives largely depended on the colonial state's financial assistance. Its abrupt disruption would mean the closure of several educational institutions, and this would have entailed a heavy loss for the Dalit community. Arya Samaj and the colonial state often found each other at odds over monetary grants and aid for providing facilities to Dalits. In 1927, a civil suit was filed against Secretary Ramananda Sanyasi of the Sabha for the illicit use of fifteen thousand rupees granted for the purpose of building proper rooms for schools under the Dalituddhar Sabha. It was discovered that as late as the 1930s, building operations had not started, and as a consequence, grants to three schools – Khera, Samiapore, and Shahdara were stopped. The superintendent said that special concessions that were being given to the Dalitudhar Sabha's work could no longer be sustained, especially given the unsatisfactory condition in which the school was found, as reported by the district inspector. The district inspector observed that there were only a few boys on roll, with no proper records and registers, etc.[34] Thus, Dalit children were made to withstand the brunt of the inefficiencies and mismanagement rampant among Sabha officials, and their clashes with the colonial state on the issue of funding for schools for the Dalit community.

Another SDS initiative that remained on paper was its attempt to build a Model Basti in Multani Dhanda (Shraddhanand Nagari), near Ajmere Gate at Paharganj. Paharganj was a mixed locality, with the Ajmere Gate area predominantly occupied by lower castes and Muslims. This initiative of building a Model Basti was aimed at reincorporating Dalits into the Hindu fold, along with controlling and disciplining their bodies, teaching them a sanitary lifestyle away from the unhealthy conditions in the slums of Delhi. The Model Basti was planned to include plots for houses, teachers' quarters, schools, a health centre, an akhara, a cooperative store, and a site for a temple.

[34] The secretary of the Dalitudhar Sabha attributed the withdrawal of government assistance to his participation in the Civil Disobedience Movement, arguing that the government penalized the Sabha by discontinuing financial aid. DSA, CC (Education), B Progs., file no. 3 (80), 1927.

Dalits were expected to observe strict vegetarianism and abstain from drinking and other bad habits.[35] In 1923, Delhi's Chief Commissioner distributed 100 plots on behalf of the All India Shraddhanand Dalitodhar Sabha. According to the Sabha's 1986 Smarika, 76 went to people from lower-caste communities who built on them: 11 Mehtars, 38 Chamars, 2 weavers, 4 potters, 18 Malis, and 2 Khatiks (who built huts).[36]

In the 1940s, a resolution by Dalit activist P. C. Jatav revealed that plots in Shraddhanand Nagari were allotted by the Dalitudhar Sabha to individuals (mostly Malis) who did not belong to the Depressed Classes. Erroneous allotments were made to 32 Malis, 2 Rajkumars, and 2 Rajputs, who did not fall within Abbott's schedule of the Depressed Classes.[37] Consequently, the authority to allot land was transferred to the Delhi Improvement Trust, and the Dalitudhar Sabha's role was eliminated. The lands were divided into two blocks: the western block was reserved for the Depressed Classes, while the government took over the eastern block (which had 42 plots) to allot to those as it saw fit. The Dalitudhar Sabha's preference for other communities and the intervention of the colonial state proved detrimental to Dalit interests. Therefore, the Depressed Classes, for no fault of theirs, had been deprived of their legitimate rights to these plots.[38]

In another instance, it is noted that Arya Samaj leaders Amin Chand, Ganpat Rai, and Jugal Kishore Khanna sought to address and stop the conversion of Chuhras and Chamars to Christianity and Islam by integrating Dalits into Hinduism through the spread of the Valmiki cult to replace the influence of Lalbegis from the mixed neighbourhoods of Delhi. They promoted the transformation of the Nabi Karim or Qadam Sharif locality, which was inhabited by various Muslim and Hindu lower-class communities such as Chirimar, Chamar, weavers, and sweepers, by demanding the construction of a Valmiki temple with a school, flats, and shops near the graveyard. However,

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[35] Swami Ramananda Sanyasi, *Annual Report of the All India Shraddhanand Dalitodhar Sabha, from March 1927 to March 1928* (Khurja: Sudarshan Printing Works, 1928), 49–50.

[36] *Smarika: Akhil Bharatvarshiye Shraddhanand Dalitodhar Sabha* (1986), 48.

[37] Mr. Abbott, Chief Commissioner, stipulated that allotments for settlement should be made for members of the Depressed Classes, including Bhangis (sweepers), Chamars (shoemakers), Julahas (weavers), Kumhars, Rehgars, Nais, and Telis. DSA, file no. 1–80/40.

[38] Ibid

the Delhi Improvement Trust agreed to allot a single-storey plot, sufficient only for the construction of a Valmiki temple in the area where predominantly Hindu lower castes resided, such as Rehgharpura, where the land for the Valmiki temple was ultimately allotted.[39]

Similarly, Dalitudhar Sabha filed a plea for land in Basti Rehgarpura, Karol Bagh, to build a school and temple. The government official denied the land for schools, claiming that the Delhi Municipality was providing enough educational arrangements in the area. However, reports indicated that the Municipal Board operated only one school for 22,000 Rehgars. Meanwhile, Dalitudhar Sabha, through the self-efforts of the Dalits, opened two boys' schools and one girls' school, which lacked proper buildings; thus, land demands were raised. But the Deputy Commissioner rejected all proposals except for the request to establish a religious temple.[40] Similarly, when Mehtar Labour Union demanded land for educational opportunities, and opening shops and flats near the Valmiki temples, the colonial state's scheme allowed the grant of land only for constructing temples, denying the construction of schools, flats, or shops.[41] Dalitudhar Sabha accepted that the allotment of land was sufficient only for temple construction and not for other schooling or recreational activities, which shows that their primary concern remained bringing Dalits back into the Hindu fold.

In his writings and speeches, B. R. Ambedkar cited several newspapers—mostly Arya Samaj-led Hindi and Urdu publications such as *Pratap, Tej, Arya Gazette,* and *Milap,* along with *The Times of India* and *Hindustan Times*—to illustrate how Arya Samajist efforts for Dalit upliftment remained unfulfilled, and were frequently attacked by Sanatanists.[42] Ambedkar also had a problem

[39] DSA, file no. 1 (100), 1941

[40] DSA, CC (R&A), B progs., file no.19, 1930.

[41] DSA, file no. 1 (100), 1941.

[42] B. R. Ambedkar, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*, vol. 5 (Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1989), 40. An article published in *Arya Gazette* argued that nationalist schools continued to discriminate against children from lower castes. *Milap* reported on 18 April 1928 that, although district councils had issued circulars directing schools to admit Dalit children, upper-caste parents withdrew their children and pressured authorities to discontinue educational initiatives for Dalits. Similarly, *Pratap* noted that, following the admission of Dalit children into common schools, villagers subjected them

with the Arya Samaj assigning permanent labels of low birth, and for encouraging individuals to pursue the ancestral, caste-based occupations.[43] Nevertheless, as this paper argues, the limited educational endeavours of the Arya Samaj were crucial to the initial schooling of certain Dalits. A primary example is Sohanlal Shastri Vidyavachaspati, who became a prominent leader in the socio-economic and educational advancement of Dalits, as will be discussed in the next section. Further, Ambedkar warned Dalits not to fall into the trap of Hindus who told untouchables to depend on the Hindus for their emancipation. He believed that some Dalits agreed with orthodox Hindu views merely to secure positions reserved for the untouchables through their grace. He called such Dalits a "predatory band of untouchables who are out to feather their nests by any means open to them."[44] In his view, it was necessary to warn untouchables because orthodox Hindu propaganda was so appealing that it could easily mislead them and draw them into its influence.

The following section discusses the case of Sohanlal Shastri Vidyavachaspati, who benefitted from the educational opportunities offered by the Arya Samajis, but never cowed and remained critical of orthodox Hindus. Even within the Arya Samaj's institutional structures, he continued to work for the educational upliftment of children from his community. In fact, his critical writing style and activism so impressed Ambedkar that he was considered as one of the candidates for a seat in the Central Legislative Assembly. Furthermore, Ambedkar wished for Shastri to serve as the Hindi translator for an English weekly newspaper he planned to publish from Delhi, aiming to make his work accessible to the people in North India.

## Role of Dalit leader Sohanlal Shastri Vidyavachaspati

The example of Sohanlal Shastri Vidyavachaspati is very crucial, as it provides a distinctive perspective on how members of the lower caste received social upliftment and educational opportunities, and on the role they played in Arya

to persecution and assault. The *Hindustan Times* further reported attacks on village night schools.

[43] B. R. Ambedkar, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*, vol. 1 (Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1979), 59.

[44] B. R. Ambedkar, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*, vol. 5 (Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1989), 396.

Samaj-run Pathshalas and other institutions. Several existing works show that the Arya Samaj helped produce educated Dalit leaders, who later broke away from it to set up organisations for the upliftment of Dalits. However, the recent work of Vijay Kumar discusses an important example of Chaudhary Mulkiram, who came in contact with Arya Samaj leaders, along with Gandhi and Ambedkar, but never abandoned practices of the Hindu tradition of vegetarianism, learned under the influence of Arya Samaj leaders and Gandhi. Sohanlal Shastri Vidyavachaspati's account becomes important for showing how he benefited from the Arya Samaj-led educational endeavours from his school days onwards.

Born in Punjab (present-day Pakistan) in 1911, he mastered Punjabi, Urdu, Hindi, Sanskrit, and English. Later, he became a teacher at a DAV school in the Shakargarh district of Kujrud Datta area (in present-day Pakistan) and occupied a high-ranking position. He was entrusted with the task of managing the entire school, an extraordinary responsibility, especially for someone belonging to the Chamar community. It is even more surprising that he was appointed to the post of teacher by removing a Brahman gold medalist. Moreover, Sohanlal Shastri Vidyavachaspati was an ardent follower of Ambedkar and used to bluntly criticise several regressive tendencies within the Arya Samaj leadership. He travelled to various places such as Jalandhar, Layalpur, Sialkot, Gurdaspur, Hoshiarpur, and Jammu, to spread the ideas of Ambedkar and declared him as the true leader of Dalits. He wrote articles in newspapers such as *Vande Mataram*, an Urdu weekly edited by Lala Lajpat Rai, criticising the treatment of untouchables by orthodox Hindus and Sikhs and expressing appreciation for the efforts of B. R. Ambedkar.

Despite several protests against him by the upper castes, who wished for his removal, he retained his position due to the manager's support. Yet, many orthodox Hindus had a sympathetic view of Shastri because he was a great scholar of Sanskrit and Hindi and taught at Arya Samaj schools; he was almost like a Brahman to a few. But their attitude towards his extended family and relatives was discriminatory, and they even asked Sohanlal to disassociate himself from the lower caste shoemaker's relatives. However, he continued to work for the upliftment of Dalits from within the Arya Samaj institutional framework. In fact, under his leadership, the Arya Samaj school located in an area dominated by Mohyal Brahmans, Dogre Brahmans, Mahajans, and

Khatris, became a space where students from different castes began to reside, eat, and study together. He told Brahman parents that if they had any objection to their children eating and studying with the children from lower castes, they could withdraw their wards' names from the school and hostel. In the school, everything happened with Sohanlal Shastri's permission; everyone had great regard for him. Further, it is interesting to note that Sohanlal Shastri also developed a strong affinity and sense of responsibility for the DAV school and its students from an outcaste background, to the extent that he did not go to Delhi even when called by Ambedkar, whom he admired so much. It was because he realised that the school needed him more than becoming a personal translator of Ambedkar's writings in Hindi and Urdu.

It was only in the wake of the Partition that he was compelled to leave the school and come to Delhi. He desired to return, but the uncertain circumstances that followed the Partition of 1947 did not allow it. Thus, after Partition, he began to work closely with Ambedkar in Delhi. He took presidential positions in the Scheduled Caste Welfare Association, Delhi branch, and Ambedkar Bhawan. He is also known to have authored several short booklets in Hindi to spread the message of B. R. Ambedkar among the people. These included *Dalit ke Muktidata Ambedkar* and *Achhuto ke Kalyan ka Sahi Rasta*, among others. Therefore, Sohanlal Shastri Vidyavachaspati's example depicts how educated Dalit leaders were able to use their association with Arya Samaj-led educational institutions for the upliftment of the children of their community, despite being a vocal opponent of a few Arya Samaj and many orthodox Hindu regressive thinkers, and a staunch advocate of Ambedkar.[45]

## Conclusion

This paper analyses both the perspectives of Arya Samaj leaders and the role of Dalit leaders, allowing for a closer examination of the socio-economic and educational initiatives of the Dalitudhar Sabha and how Dalit communities perceived these reforms. Studying the initiatives of leading Dalitudhar Sabha leaders, such as Ramananda Sanyasi, Ganpat Rai, and Jugal Kishore Khanna, helps recognise their efforts for Dalits, while also highlighting the limitations

[45] B. A. Sohanlal Shastri Vidyavachaspati, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar ke Sampark Mein Pachees Varsh* (New Delhi: Samyak Prakashan, 2022), 14–26.

of their approach. It reveals how the conflict between Arya Samaj leaders and the colonial state, over funds and land disputes, deprived Dalits of the few facilities accessible to them. Moreover, Arya Samaj's intent to reclaim and retain Dalits in the Hindu fold led to the expansion of educational and clean housing facilities near the Valmiki temple in the western extension area, such as Ajmere Gate, Farash Khana, and Paharganj. But it could not completely succeed in the educational upliftment of the Dalits. Nonetheless, Arya Samaj initiatives helped produce the first generation of educated Dalit leaders, such as Swami Achutananda and Sohan Lal Shastri Vidyavachaspati. On the other hand, an evaluation of the role of Sohan Lal Shastri Vidyavachaspati provides valuable insight into how, despite limited educational opportunities, he chose to remain associated with Arya Samaj-led educational institutions without compromising his religious and ideological autonomy, and used his affiliation with Ambedkar's ideology to reorient and make Arya Samaj-led educational spaces more inclusive and accommodating of children from all castes.

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# Beyond the Written Archive: Dalit Women's Songs and Vernacular Memory in North India

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*Dalit women occupy a distinct yet under-documented space in North Indian folk traditions, where their voices emerge as carriers of resistance, repositories of collective memory, and agents of identity formation. This paper examines folk songs, oral narratives, ritual performances, and community memories as cultural forms through which Dalit women's experiences have been preserved despite their near absence from formal historical records. By tracing themes of labour, suffering, desire, injustice, and agency embedded in genres such as biraha (lamentation or narrative songs of loss and social suffering), sohar (childbirth songs performed by women), and kachahri songs (songs of complaint, testimony, and everyday injustice), the study shows how these traditions document the micro-histories of everyday Dalit life. Situating these oral traditions within the broader context of anti-caste mobilisations in early twentieth-century North India—including the Adi Hindu movement associated with Swami Achhutanand and the wider circulation of Ambedkarite ideas—the paper argues that Dalit women's songs function as vernacular or counter-archives that preserve experiences excluded from dominant textual records. Through a close reading of song lyrics alongside ethnographic and historical sources, this article demonstrates how women's expressive traditions challenge Brahmanical narratives, sustain subaltern memory, and articulate forms of dignity and resistance rooted in everyday life. By foregrounding these cultural practices, the study contributes to scholarship on Dalit cultural politics. It highlights the crucial yet often overlooked role of women's oral traditions in shaping historical memory and identity formation in North India.*

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**Keywords:** Dalit women, Oral traditions, Counter-archives, Folk songs, Caste, Gender, Cultural resistance

## Introduction

In late-colonial North India, particularly in the eastern Hindi-speaking regions of present-day Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, Dalit women's experiences of caste, labour, and social marginalisation were rarely recorded in formal archives and political writings. However, these experiences found expression in a rich repertoire of folk songs, ritual performances, and oral narratives that circulated within domestic, labouring, and festive spaces. Genres such as *kajri*,

*birha*, *sohar* (childbirth songs), *jatsar* (grinding songs), *kachahri* (complaint songs), Holi songs, and folk theatre traditions such as *Nautanki* formed an important expressive sphere through which Dalit women articulated suffering, dignity, and resistance. These cultural practices can be read not merely as forms of entertainment or ritual, but also as vernacular archives that preserve memories and experiences largely absent from written historical records.

The emergence of these expressive traditions must be understood within the broader landscape of anti-caste mobilisation in early twentieth-century North India. Movements such as the Adi Hindu movement, led by Swami Achhutanand, sought to challenge Brahmanical religious authority and reclaim Dalits as the original inhabitants of the subcontinent. At the same time, the early circulation of Ambedkarite ideas encouraged new forms of Dalit self-assertion and political consciousness. While the histories of these movements have largely focused on male leaders, printed pamphlets, and institutional politics, Dalit women's participation often unfolded in less visible cultural arenas such as ritual singing, storytelling, and performance.

Traditional historiography tends to define leadership and political agency in terms of visible and institutionalised roles—organisers, orators, writers, and political figures. Such definitions obscure informal and cultural forms of agency, particularly those exercised by Dalit women. Dalit women's worlds were "largely oral, symbolic, and ritualistic—therefore largely undocumented."[1] This absence is reflected not only in the scarcity of written records but also in the archival silences produced by caste hierarchies, patriarchal knowledge systems, and the privileging of print culture within historical scholarship. Although it remains difficult to identify individual Dalit women performers between 1900 and 1947, oral memory, folkloric traditions, and later ethnographic accounts confirm that lower-caste women actively participated in ritual singing, folk theatre, and performative gatherings that subtly challenged caste hierarchies.

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**Note on Translation and Ethnographic Sources**: All translations are by the author. Unless otherwise indicated, the songs discussed in the following sections are drawn from published ethnographic collections and secondary sources, particularly the works of Smita Tewari Jassal and Elena Caranti.

[1] Badri Narayan, *Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion in North India: Culture, Identity and Politics* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006), 37.

This paper argues that Dalit women's folk traditions in late-colonial North India constituted a 'counter-archive' and a 'counter-public' sphere in which caste oppression, gendered labour, sexual vulnerability, and aspirations for dignity were articulated and remembered. By counter-archive, I refer to forms of historical memory produced outside official institutions and textual repositories, where marginalised communities preserve their experiences through oral, performative, and cultural practices. Through a close reading of folk songs and performances, this study examines how Dalit women transformed everyday cultural expression into a medium of historical consciousness. Rather than treating these traditions merely as cultural artefacts, the paper approaches them as alternative archives of memory and resistance through which Dalit women recorded everyday experiences, preserved collective histories, and contributed to the formation of a resistant Dalit identity in North India.

This article adopts a qualitative and interpretive methodology combining close textual reading of folk song lyrics with insights drawn from ethnographic and historical scholarship on North Indian oral traditions. The songs analysed in this study are not derived from primary fieldwork but are drawn from published ethnographic collections and secondary sources, particularly works by Smita Tewari Jassal, Elena Caranti, and other scholars of North Indian folk cultures. The selection of songs is guided by their thematic relevance to caste, gender, labour, migration, and everyday forms of resistance, with particular attention to genres such as *sohar, kajri*, *birha*, *jatsar,* and *kachahri* songs. Rather than aiming for exhaustive coverage, the article uses representative examples to illustrate recurring patterns in Dalit women's expressive traditions. Close reading is employed to interpret the symbolic, emotional, and socio-political meanings embedded in these songs, while situating them within the broader historical context of late-colonial and early postcolonial North India. In doing so, the study treats oral traditions not merely as cultural artefacts but as vernacular archives through which Dalit women's experiences are remembered and articulated.

The songs analysed in this article are composed in a range of North Indian vernacular languages and dialects, primarily Bhojpuri, Awadhi, and regional varieties of Hindi. These linguistic forms often resist standardisation and carry culturally specific idioms, metaphors, and symbolic meanings that do not always translate directly into English. All translations provided in this article

are my own and are intended to convey the sense and context of the original lyrics rather than their literal structure. In some cases, nuances of tone, humour, or cultural references may be partially lost in translation, and therefore, the original text is presented alongside the translation to retain its expressive richness.

While the article refers broadly to North India, its primary geographical focus is on the eastern Hindi-speaking regions, particularly present-day Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, from which most of the song traditions discussed here are drawn. These regions have historically constituted a rich zone of vernacular cultural production, especially in Bhojpuri and related dialect traditions. Chronologically, the study is centred on the late colonial period (c. 1900–1947), while also drawing on ethnographic accounts and oral traditions documented in the post-independence period to reconstruct continuities in Dalit women's expressive cultures. This approach allows the analysis to situate these songs within a longer historical trajectory of caste, labour, and gendered experience.

The paper proceeds in six sections. It begins with a discussion of historiography, orality, and the absence of Dalit women in the archive, followed by a contextual section on caste, gender, and the socio-economic conditions of late-colonial North India. The subsequent four sections form the core of the analysis. The first examines domestic and ritual song traditions through which Dalit women articulated experiences of marriage, childbirth, and spiritual life. The second turns to labour songs and everyday genres that record agrarian work, migration, and economic hardship. The third explores public performance traditions such as Holi songs and Nautanki, where women publicly challenged caste authority and entered cultural counter-publics. The final section reflects on these oral traditions as vernacular archives through which Dalit women preserved collective memory and historical consciousness.

## Historiography, Orality, and the Absence of Dalit Women in the Archive

To situate this argument within existing scholarship, it is necessary to examine how questions of archive, orality, and subaltern absence have been addressed in historiography. The marginalisation of Dalit women in historical writing reflects a broader problem of the archive and method. As Gayatri Chakravorty

Spivak famously asked, "Can the subaltern speak?"[2]—and more pointedly, can they be heard within dominant historiographical and archival frameworks? The absence of Dalit women from historical narratives is not simply a matter of silence but of the ways in which archives themselves have been constituted. Conventional archives privilege written documents, elite authorship, and institutional records, often excluding oral, performative, and vernacular forms of knowledge. As scholars of orality, such as Jack Goody and Jan Vansina have shown, oral traditions are not merely repositories of factual information but interpretive narratives through which communities construct meaning, memory, and historical consciousness.

Within Dalit historiography, scholars have drawn attention to the importance of cultural expression in articulating Dalit identities and political consciousness. Studies by Badri Narayan, Smita Tewari Jassal and Charu Gupta demonstrate that folk songs, oral narratives, and performative traditions have played a significant role in shaping Dalit cultural politics in North India.[3] Yet even within these accounts, women's voices often appear only intermittently. The rise of print culture in the late colonial period enabled Dalit male intellectuals to circulate political ideas and challenge caste hierarchies through pamphlets, newspapers, and literary writings. At the same time, reformist and colonial discourses increasingly privileged textuality, leading many women's expressive traditions—particularly songs performed in domestic or communal settings—to be dismissed as "obscene," "vulgar," or "uncivilised"[4] Such characterisations contributed to the gradual exclusion of these traditions from literary canons and historical archives.

Feminist and Dalit feminist scholars have further emphasised how Dalit women's experiences were marginalised within both nationalist and Dalit political narratives. This absence also reflects what Ranajit Guha identified as the structural exclusion of subaltern voices from elite historiography, where

[2] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 66–111.

[3] Badri Narayan, *Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion in North India: Culture, Identity and Politics* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006); Smita Tewari Jassal, *Unearthing Gender: Folksongs of North India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); Charu Gupta, "Sexuality, Obscenity, Community: Women, Muslims, and the Hindu Public in Colonial India," *Modern Asian Studies* 32, no. 3 (1998): 727–59.

[4] Jassal, *Unearthing Gender*; Gupta, "Sexuality, Obscenity, Community."

the everyday experiences of marginalised groups remain outside dominant historical narratives.[5] As Sharmila Rege also argues, Dalit women's voices do not merely represent "a different voice" but emerge from a long history of struggles that have often remained excluded from mainstream historiography.[6] Similarly, Ranjana Dey observes that neither the Dalit movement nor the mainstream women's movement in India fully addressed the specific concerns arising from Dalit women's intersectional experiences of caste and gender. Within male-authored Dalit narratives as well, women frequently appear as self-sacrificing mothers or silent sufferers, rather than as agents of change.[7] This double marginalisation—within both historiography and political discourse—makes it necessary to turn to oral traditions, songs, and performative cultures as alternative sources through which Dalit women's experiences, memories, and forms of resistance can be recovered.

## Late-Colonial North India: Caste, Gender, and the Cultural World of Dalit Women

While these historiographical debates highlight the limitations of the archive, it is equally important to situate Dalit women's experiences within their specific historical and social context. The period between 1900 and 1947 in North India was marked by profound transformations in caste relations, agrarian economy, and political consciousness. Colonial revenue systems, landlordism, and the commercialisation of agriculture intensified economic precarity among Dalit and lower-caste communities, who were concentrated in landless and semi-proletarian occupations such as agricultural labour, leatherwork, fishing, and domestic service.[8] These late-colonial decades also witnessed increasing pressures of labour migration and social mobility that reshaped everyday life in rural society. Within this changing social landscape, Dalit women's experiences of labour, humiliation, and survival found expression in a rich repertoire of songs, rituals, and oral traditions.

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[5] Ranajit Guha, "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India," in *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982), 1–8.

[6] Sharmila Rege, "Dalit Women Talk Differently."

[7] Dey, "Dalit Women's Autobiographical Writings," 2.

[8] Jassal, *Unearthing Gender*; Bina Agarwal, *A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

Within this political economy, Dalit women bore a disproportionate burden: they worked in the fields, in landlords' households, and within their own families while remaining largely invisible in both colonial records and nationalist histories. Ethnographic work by Smita Tewari Jassal suggests that women on the lowest rungs of the caste hierarchy often performed the most arduous and poorly remunerated labour, frequently combining childcare, fieldwork, and domestic duties without recognition or compensation.[9] Such invisibility reveals not only economic marginalisation but also the limited presence of Dalit women's labour within formal historical archives.

Gendered labour was inseparable from caste domination. Dalit women's bodies were sites through which both economic exploitation and caste hierarchy were reproduced. As Sharmila Rege argues, caste operates not only through the division of labour but also through the "sexual division of labour" and the "division of sexual labour,"[10] making women's sexuality central to the maintenance of caste boundaries. Dalit women were often treated as polluted and sexually accessible to dominant-caste men in a simultaneous manner, a contradiction legitimised through custom and religion.[11] These conditions produced a social world in which labour, sexuality, and humiliation were deeply intertwined in women's everyday experiences.

At the same time, late-colonial North India was a period of intense ideological ferment. Social reform movements, nationalist politics, and caste-based mobilisations intersected and often clashed. Among these was Swami Achhutanand's Adi Hindu movement, which sought to reclaim Dalit history, reject Brahmanical mediation, and assert an indigenous Dalit identity rooted in pre-Aryan and non-Brahmanical traditions.[12]While the movement articulated new forms of Dalit political consciousness through pamphlets, speeches, and public organisation, its textual archive and leadership structures remained overwhelmingly male. As a result, many dimensions of Dalit women's experiences continued to be expressed primarily within oral and ritual traditions rather than the printed archive of the movement.

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[9] Jassal, *Unearthing Gender*, 73–76, 91–92.

[10] Rege, "Dalit Women Talk Differently," WS41–43.

[11] Dey, "Dalit Women's Autobiographical Writings," 2.

[12] Narayan, *Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion*; Gail Omvedt, *Seeking Begumpura: The Social Vision of Anti-Caste Intellectuals* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2008).

For Dalit women, therefore, the primary arena of participation was not the pamphlet, the meeting hall, or the legislative platform, but the realm of oral culture—songs, rituals, festivals, storytelling, and performances. Women were the custodians of seasonal practices, birth and marriage rituals, goddess worship, and everyday song traditions that sustained community life. Through these practices, memories of suffering, labour, and dignity were preserved and transmitted across generations.

## Domestic and Ritual Worlds

Within this broader socio-economic and political context, Dalit women's expressive traditions emerged most visibly within the intimate spaces of the home, the courtyard, and the ritual circle. Within these spaces, genres such as *sohar*, *suhag*, lullabies, and ritual chants formed a gendered soundscape through which women reflected upon kinship, marriage, labour, and spiritual life. These songs circulated collectively during rituals and everyday gatherings, providing occasions for women to voice anxieties, frustrations, humour, and memories that rarely appeared in written records. Examining such traditions offers insight into how Dalit women interpreted their social worlds within domestic and ritual settings.

*Sohar* (childbirth songs), typically composed in Bhojpuri and related dialects, illuminate how women experienced reproduction, vulnerability, and honour within hierarchised caste societies. These songs record pain, hope, and anxiety surrounding fertility and survival, while also highlighting the expectations placed on women's bodies within patriarchal households. Similarly, marriage songs capture the emotional consequences of leaving natal homes, entering unfamiliar households, and negotiating authority within extended families. Much of Dalit women's knowledge about such experiences survives not in institutional texts but in testimony, memory, and everyday speech, of which ritual songs form an important repository.[13]

One such Bhojpuri wedding song recorded among Dalit women in Buxar presents marriage not as ritual fulfilment but as a moment of economic displacement.

[13] Sharmila Rege, *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonios* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2006).

काहे करेलू बियाह हमार, फेंक देलू बक्सर में,
पहिले दूल्हा बूढ़ भइल, फिर घरवा दरिद्र।[14]

Why did you get me married?
You dumped me here in Buxar.
First, a groom so aged,
Then a home (that is) impoverished.

Rather than celebrating marriage as a sacred union, the song expresses resentment and disillusionment. The bride's lament highlights two recurring features of matrimonial arrangements in the impoverished communities: the lack of choice in selecting a spouse and movement into economically insecure households. By describing the groom as "aged" and the household as "impoverished," the song reveals how marriage could mark a transition into harsher social and material conditions. Sung collectively during wedding rituals, such lyrics allow women to comment on the realities of marriage even within ceremonies that formally celebrate it.

Marriage songs also contain narratives that regulate sexuality and reinforce caste boundaries. In an *urahari* (elopement) song recorded among Dusadh communities, a woman who elopes across caste lines is punished through ritual degradation.

खोल साड़ी तोर सजीली, फाड़ल पहिर लऽ हो राम,
हाथ में लाठी ले लऽ, सूअर चरावे जा हो राम।
जानत रहित जात तोहार, दुसाध हो राम,
बाबुल के घर ना छोड़ित।[15]

Undo your fine sari and wear the torn one.
Take a stick in your hand and go graze the swine.
Had I known, O Ram, that you were a Dusadh,
I would not have left my father's home.

The imagery of pig grazing—associated with stigmatised labour—symbolises the punishment attached to caste transgression. The song dramatizes how

[14] Jassal, *Unearthing Gender*, 57.
[15] Ibid., 80–81.

women's sexuality becomes a key site through which caste boundaries are enforced. At the same time, the narration of such stories within women's song traditions creates a space where anxieties about caste, desire, and social control can be discussed and interpreted collectively.

Dalit women were also custodians of distinctive ritual and devotional worlds. In many North Indian Dalit communities, goddesses such as Sitala and Lona Chamarin were invoked as protectors against disease, hunger, and injustice, often outside Brahmanical priestly mediation.[16] Songs and rituals associated with these deities reflected cosmologies grounded in everyday experiences of suffering, healing, and endurance. Through such traditions, women sustained forms of spiritual authority that did not depend on Brahmanical ritual hierarchies. Taken together, these traditions reveal how domestic and ritual gatherings allowed Dalit women to interpret their social conditions through shared cultural expression. Within these spaces, women articulated grief, humour, resentment, and resilience while negotiating the constraints of caste and patriarchy. Long before Dalit women appeared in print or formal political institutions, they were already shaping collective understandings of dignity, suffering, and survival through song.

## Labour and Everyday Life

If domestic and ritual songs articulated Dalit women's emotional and spiritual worlds, labour songs and everyday genres directly registered the material realities of caste and gender. Much of Dalit women's daily life in rural North India revolved around agricultural labour, household production, and seasonal migration. These experiences found expression in song traditions such as *kajri*, *jatsar* (grinding songs), and women's migration songs. Sung collectively during work or in moments of rest, these genres preserved memories of exhaustion, injustice, and endurance that rarely entered formal historical records.

One *kajri* labour song vividly captures the bodily strain of agricultural work:

खेत में रोपनी करी गोरी, कमर टूटे हो राम,

[16] Ann Grodzins Gold and Gloria Goodwin Raheja, *Listen to the Heron's Words: Reimagining Gender and Kinship in North India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Jassal, *Unearthing Gender*.

फिर भी सास कहे, आलसी है नारी हो राम।[17]

I transplant seedlings in the fields, O fair one,
My back is breaking, O Ram.
Yet my mother-in-law says
The woman is lazy, O Ram.

The song exposes the paradox of women's labour in agrarian households. Although women perform physically demanding agricultural work, their labour remains unrecognised and is often dismissed as inadequate or invisible within patriarchal family structures. By describing the physical strain of transplanting seedlings alongside the accusation of laziness, the lyrics highlight the persistent undervaluation of women's work within both caste hierarchies and domestic authority.

Songs of this kind appear frequently in women's seasonal repertoires across eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, where agricultural labour formed the backbone of rural livelihoods. These traditions repeatedly refer to unequal wages, hunger, and the physical toll of working in the fields, revealing how labouring women interpreted their economic conditions through shared cultural expression.[18] Such experiences were further intensified by women's limited access to land ownership and economic recognition within agrarian households. Through songs, women named both the hardships of labour and the emotional worlds that surrounded it.

Migration deepened these burdens. Seasonal or long-distance migration of men—often to cities or plantation regions- expanded women's responsibilities within rural households while also producing new forms of emotional strain. In *birha* and migration songs, women sang of loneliness, uncertainty, and endurance in the absence of husbands or sons. These songs reveal how the economic transformations of the late colonial period reshaped family life and labour arrangements, turning private experiences of absence and anxiety into collectively shared narratives. One such *birha* migration song is:

[17] Elena Caranti, *Interlocking Dimensions in Hindustani Music: Texts of Caiti, Kajri, and Jhula* (Tübingen: University of Tübingen, 2022), 218.

[18] Jassal, *Unearthing Gender*, 73–76, 91–92.

पिया गइलें बिदेसवा, हमार सेजिया सूनी हो राम,
निंदिया ना आवे अखियां में, रतिया कटे कैसे राम.[19]

My husband has gone to distant lands,
My bed lies empty, O Ram.
Sleep will not come to my eyes—
How will this long night pass, O Ram?

The lyrics express the emotional consequences of labour migration for women who remained in the village. The empty bed (*sejiya suni*) symbolises not only conjugal absence but also the expanded responsibilities that women bore within households during periods of male migration. While men's mobility was often framed as an economic necessity, songs such as this reveal its gendered effects: loneliness, sleeplessness, and the burden of sustaining household life in their absence. Through such expressions, *birha* songs preserve a record of the emotional labour that accompanied agrarian migration but rarely appears in official economic histories.

Domestic labour produced its own repertoire of songs. *Jatsar* songs, performed while grinding grain, were typically sung in small female gatherings, creating intimate spaces where women reflected on kinship, inheritance, and economic inequality.[20] Within these environments, women articulated grievances about property, marriage, and displacement. A *jatsar* song, sung by women while grinding grain in domestic settings, reflects on questions of inheritance, labour, and displacement within patriarchal households:

जो कमाइल बाबूजी, आधा हमार हक,
बस सिंदूर के टीका, दूर कर देत घर।[21]

In all you earn, Father, I claim half of the share.
Yet a pinch of vermilion sends me far away from home.

The lyric critiques the patriarchal logic of inheritance and marriage. While daughters contribute to household labour, marriage removes them from

[19] Caranti, *Interlocking Dimensions in Hindustani Music*, 154.
[20] Jassal, *Unearthing Gender*, 73–74.
[21] Ibid., 73–74.

claims to family property and relocates them to their husband's household. The symbolic act of applying *sindoor* thus marks not only marital status but also economic displacement. Through such songs, women reflected critically on kinship structures and the unequal distribution of labour and resources within caste society.

These songs illuminate the everyday political economy of Dalit women's lives. They reveal how agricultural labour, domestic work, and kinship arrangements shaped women's experiences of caste and gender inequality. At the same time, the collective performance of these songs created spaces of recognition and solidarity among women whose labour remained largely invisible within official records. In this way, work songs preserved a history of endurance, negotiation, and quiet resistance within the routines of everyday life.

## Public and Performative Worlds

While domestic and labour songs gave voice to Dalit women's private and collective struggles, public performance created spaces where those voices could circulate beyond the households and the fields. Festivals, competitive singing gatherings, ballads, and theatrical traditions allowed women to speak before wider audiences and to comment on caste authority through satire, humour, and narrative. Through Holi songs, *kajri* competitions, nautanki theatre, and later Ambedkarite *jalsa* gatherings, Dalit women entered what may be described as a cultural counter-public, where performance became a medium for publicly articulated dissent, memory, and dignity.

Seasonal festivals such as Holi created important moments for women's public speeches. During these celebrations, women sang suggestive and obscene songs that temporarily inverted everyday hierarchies. As ethnographic accounts note, women used Holi songs to mock men, ridicule upper-caste masculinity, and openly express anger or desire in ways otherwise discouraged within everyday social life.[22] These performances created ritualised moments in which women could publicly challenge patriarchal authority.

[22] Ibid., 229–248.

Ethnographic evidence from rural Bihar further demonstrates how Dalit women used song as a form of symbolic confrontation. In the village of Misraulia in Chhapra district, Dalit singers deliberately performed sexually explicit versions of popular songs in order to embarrass upper-caste men present at the gathering. According to one account, a group of Dalit women sang a lewd version of a song naming Brahmin men and their sisters, forcing them to withdraw from the performance space. A Brahmin woman singer, Meena Devi, later distanced herself from these versions, insisting that her own songs were "not like that"—that is, not as outspoken or confrontational as those sung by lower-caste women.[23] The incident reveals how Dalit women could use obscenity, humour, and public naming as instruments of social humiliation, transforming festive performance into an arena where caste tensions were openly negotiated.

Competitive singing traditions such as *kajri* and *dangali* similarly created public spaces in which women's voices could challenge male authority through satire. In these gatherings, singers exchanged improvised verses before mixed audiences, often ridiculing social hierarchies through humour. One such *kajri* satire is:

> बाबूजी के मूंछ बड़ी,
> पर नाहीं उसमें दम।[24]
>
> The master's moustache is large,
> But there is no strength in it.

These lyrics mock the exaggerated masculinity associated with upper-caste authority. In North Indian social symbolism, the moustache often represents male honour and dominance. By ridiculing this symbol in a public performance, the song undermines the authority it represents. Such satire demonstrates how women's singing could convert festive gatherings into spaces of critique, allowing performers, often from lower-status communities, to question social power through humour. Indeed, performers from lower-caste backgrounds were frequently among the most daring voices in *kajri*

[23] Ibid., 57.
[24] Caranti, *Interlocking Dimensions in Hindustani Music*, 315.

competitions.[25]

Dalit women's oral traditions also preserved heroic counter-histories that challenged dominant nationalist narratives. One such figure is Jhalkaribai (c. 1830–1858), a Dalit woman remembered for fighting in Rani Lakshmibai's army during the uprising of 1857. In Bundelkhand and Western Uttar Pradesh, her story circulated through *birha* songs, *alha* ballads, *katha* performances, and *nautanki* theatre, where she appeared not merely as a supporting character but as a heroic figure embodying courage and loyalty.[26] Through these performances, Dalit communities reclaimed Jhalkaribai as a symbol of Dalit women's bravery, thereby weaving their narratives into histories of resistance from which they had long been excluded.

Popular theatre further expanded women's presence within the public cultural sphere. *Nautanki*, a travelling musical theatre tradition that flourished in North India in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, reached large audiences through all-night performances that combined songs, dialogues, and dramatic narratives. Although originally dominated by male performers, women increasingly entered the stage during the early twentieth century. Among the most celebrated figures was Gulab Bai, widely regarded as the first female star of *nautanki*. Born into the Bedia community, a socially marginal performer caste, Gulab Bai rose to national prominence and eventually founded her own troupe, transforming performance into a source of public authority and recognition.[27] The emergence of such performers marked a significant rupture in norms of gendered visibility, demonstrating how women from marginal communities could claim cultural leadership within popular theatre.

*Nautanki* narratives also articulated Dalit women's resistance through dramatic portrayals of sexual violence and retaliation. In a performance centred on the figure of Phulan Devi, the protagonist responds to attempted assault with open defiance in this Hindi song:

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[25] Ibid., 322.

[26] Narayan, *Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion*; Omvedt, *Seeking Begumpura*.

[27] Kathryn Hansen, *Grounds for Play: The Nautanki Theatre of North India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

अगर इस समय मेरे शरीर को छूने की कोशिश की,
तो तेरे माथे पर ईंट मार दूँगी।[28]

If you dare lay a hand upon my body now,
I will smash your forehead with a brick.

Here, the moment of threatened violation becomes the turning point that transforms the protagonist into a figure of resistance. By explicitly identifying upper-caste aggressors as the targets of rebellion, such performances convert personal trauma into collective anti-caste defiance. The female body, often treated as a site of vulnerability, becomes the locus of political assertion instead.

These performative traditions illustrate how Dalit women's expressive culture moved gradually from ritual participation to overt political articulation. In the early twentieth century, the spread of Ambedkarite politics provided new ideological frameworks through which such cultural expressions could be reinterpreted. Anti-caste songs, speeches, and performances circulated widely through Ambedkarite *jalsa* gatherings, where music and narrative were used to communicate political ideas to largely non-literate audiences. As Rege observes, women played a crucial role in transmitting the "oral repertoire of personalised yet very collective accounts" of Babasaheb and the Dalit movement within families and communities.[29]

Over time, these cultural practices intersected more directly with organised political mobilisation. Dalit women participated in meetings, protests, and conversion movements associated with Ambedkarite politics, while continuing to carry oral memories of the movement across generations.[30] Cultural performance and political activism thus reinforced one another: songs and narratives cultivated a moral language of dignity and resistance that later found expression in organised social movements. These traditions demonstrate that Dalit women's public performances were not merely forms of entertainment but sites of historical memory and political imagination.

[28] Ashik Banwari Lal, *Sangit Phoolan Devi urf Vikram ki Rifle* (Allahabad: Bambai Pustkalaya, n.d.), 5.

[29] Rege, "Dalit Women Talk Differently," WS41.

[30] Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

Through satire, heroic narratives, theatrical performances, and musical protests, Dalit women transformed popular culture into a space where caste authority could be challenged and alternative histories articulated. Long before Dalit women could participate widely in print culture or institutional politics, they had already begun to reshape the public sphere through the power of song and performance.

## Songs as Dalit Feminist Archives

Taken together, these domestic, labouring, and performative traditions reveal a broader pattern: the formation of an alternative archive through which Dalit women's experiences were preserved and transmitted. Dalit women's songs, stories, and performances formed a vast but fragile archive of caste, gender, and resistance. Because Dalit women were largely excluded from literacy, print culture, and formal leadership, oral traditions became the primary medium through which they preserved historical experiences and articulated injustice. As Sharmila Rege argues, Dalit women's knowledge survives in testimony, memory, and everyday speech rather than in institutional texts.[31]Oral traditions, therefore, function not merely as cultural expressions but as epistemic sites where Dalit women generated and sustained their own ways of knowing. In this sense, they may also be understood as forms of cultural memory through which collective experiences are preserved and transmitted across generations.[32]

Folktales, songs, and performances preserve stories of caste atrocities, migration, labour exploitation, and everyday humiliation that rarely enter official archives[33] These narratives record both suffering and survival, blending personal memory with collective history. As Ancy Placid demonstrates for Kerala, Dalit women's songs register dissent, selfhood, and critique of upper-caste patriarchal structures.[34] A similar pattern is visible in North India, where women's folk genres articulate what Badri Narayan calls "cultural resources of protest."[35] Through repetition, performance, and

[31] Rege, *Writing Caste/Writing Gender*.

[32] Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*.

[33] Omvedt, *Seeking Begumpura*; Rege, *Writing Caste/Writing Gender*.

[34] Ancy Placid, "Dissenting Dalit Voices: An Overview of Dalit Women's Autobiographies in India," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 22, no. 1 (2021): 142–54.

[35] Narayan, *Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion.*

intergenerational transmission, these oral forms ensure that Dalit histories are remembered even when denied official recognition.

One recurring theme within these traditions is the emotional cost of migration and separation. As men migrated for seasonal labour, women were left to manage households and agricultural work alone, and this experience frequently appears in genres such as *caiti* and *birha*, where longing and loneliness become vehicles for expressing broader social anxieties. These cultural archives also reveal a historical shift in Dalit women's political consciousness. As Dey notes, Dalit women initially adopted Hindu ritual practices as "an outlet for their oppressed souls," even as these practices reinforced subordination.[36] Over time, however, such accommodation gave way to critique and rejection. With the spread of Ambedkarite consciousness, women began to challenge Brahmanical structures and embrace new idioms of dignity, equality, and rationality. This transformation is reflected in the movement from goddess-centred devotional traditions to Buddhist and Ambedkarite cultural forms, demonstrating how shifts in political consciousness were recorded within oral expressive practices.[37]

S. M. Patil's study of Ambedkarite women's songs in Maharashtra offers a useful framework for understanding this transformation.[38] Genres such as (*ovi* women's work songs), *powada* (ballads of heroism), *jalsa*, *buddhageet*, and *bheemgeet* emerged as "weapons of dissent" against Brahmanism, articulating critiques of caste, patriarchy, and social exclusion. Although Patil's work is regionally and temporally distinct, the broader conceptual trajectory applies to North India as well. Even prior to the consolidation of Ambedkarite cultural movements, Dalit women's song traditions discussed above articulated experiences of feudal exploitation, caste humiliation, and aspirations for dignity, anticipating later idioms of self-respect and emancipation.

Crucially, these cultural transformations were accompanied by active political participation. In the 1930s, Dalit women organised independent meetings within the Ambedkarite movement and passed resolutions against child

[36] Dey, "Dalit Women's Autobiographical Writings," 7–9.

[37] Ibid.

[38] S. M. Patil, "Listening to the Call for Social Justice: On Ambedkarite Women's Songs and Poetic Expressions from Maharashtra, India," *Revista Científica Arbitrada de la Fundación Mente Clara* 8, no. 1 (2023): 1–32.

marriage, enforced widowhood, and dowry, identifying these practices as forms of Brahmanical oppression.[39] They also participated in movements such as the Mahad Satyagraha, the Independent Labour Party, and the Scheduled Caste Federation, and supported *dharmantar* (religious conversion) as a demand for dignity and emancipation.[40] Cultural expression and political activism were thus deeply intertwined, with songs and performances circulating these ideas across communities. These processes also involved the gradual appropriation of women's expressive traditions into male-dominated performance cultures. As Smita Tewari Jassal notes, genres once primarily performed by women were increasingly taken over by male performers.[41] Erika Caranti similarly observes that women's song traditions were often sanitised and reshaped, erasing elements such as sexual humour, complaint, and labouring voices.[42] In this sense, women's oral traditions may also be understood as forms of counter-memory that respond critically to dominant historical narratives.[43]

Seen in this light, Dalit women's oral traditions constitute a Dalit feminist archive: a body of knowledge rooted in embodied experience, collective memory, and cultural creativity. As Rege reminds us, thought becomes emancipatory when it begins from the lives of Dalit women. Songs, stories, and performances are therefore not secondary to political history but are among its most vital sources, revealing how Dalit women imagined dignity, enacted resistance, and shaped the moral and historical landscape of anti-caste struggle. Long before Dalit women could appear prominently in print culture or institutional politics, they had already begun to reshape their social worlds through the power of song.[44]

## Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that Dalit women's songs and performative traditions in North India function not merely as cultural expressions but as

[39] Rege, "Dalit Women Talk Differently," WS41–42.

[40] Ibid., WS41.

[41] Jassal, *Unearthing Gender*, 250–70.

[42] Caranti, *Interlocking Dimensions in Hindustani Music*, 83–90.

[43] Ibid., 47; Ann Grodzins Gold and Gloria Goodwin Raheja, *Listen to the Heron's Words: Reimagining Gender and Kinship in North India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

[44] Rege, "Dalit Women Talk Differently." WS44.

vital archives of caste and gendered experience. Although Dalit women are largely absent from written historical records of the late colonial period, their voices persist in oral traditions such as marriage songs, labour songs, migration narratives, satirical verses, and performative genres like nautanki and community singing traditions. These songs preserve memories of everyday life, marriage as a form of economic displacement, the burdens of agricultural labour, the emotional consequences of migration, and the regulation of caste through women's bodies, while also recording moments of satire, resistance, and dignity. Read together, these expressive traditions reveal how Dalit women documented their social worlds and negotiated structures of caste and patriarchy even when excluded from formal institutions of literacy and political leadership.

By approaching these traditions as part of an archive rather than merely as folklore, this study contributes to broader debates on the nature of historical evidence and the politics of the archive. It expands the concept of the archive beyond written documents to include oral, performative, and vernacular forms of knowledge through which marginalised communities preserve their histories. In doing so, it recovers Dalit women not as silent figures within anti-caste history but as active producers of historical memory whose experiences circulated through song, storytelling, and collective performance. Cultural traditions thus emerge as vital sources for reconstructing social histories that remain largely invisible in official records.

Recognising songs as a significant component of Dalit feminist archives also opens new directions for historical research. Future scholarship may further explore regional song traditions, performance circuits, and oral narratives to understand how marginalised communities produced and transmitted historical knowledge outside institutional archives. Attending more closely to oral traditions, memory practices, and vernacular cultural forms can help historians reconstruct histories of caste, gender, and resistance that remain embedded within everyday cultural life. In this sense, Dalit women's songs are not simply echoes of the past but living archives that continue to shape the historical imagination of anti-caste struggle. Attending these vernacular and performative archives not only expands the scope of historical inquiry but also re-centres Dalit women as active producers of knowledge, memory, and resistance.

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# Maoism, Identity and Ethno-Marxist Praxis in Nepal, 1996-2006

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*This paper attempts to study the Maoist movement in Nepal, which began in 1996 CE, and the ways in which its ideological tenets were significantly reshaped as it gained popularity among people belonging to the indigenous nationalities, or janajatis. Drawing upon historical and anthropological studies, the paper seeks to map how the political praxis of Marxism in Nepal critically accommodated claims relating to ethnic belonging within the ambit of its envisioned political project. By tracing the nature of interactions, particularly during the insurgency period of 1996–2006, between Maoist activists on the one hand and members of janajati groups such as the Thangmi, Kham Magar, and Tamang on the other, the paper demonstrates how an abstract ideology such as Marxism–Maoism, with its avowed focus on class struggle, was compelled to engage with issues of ethnicity, religion, and ritual when deployed in a specific regional context, in this case Nepal. Thus, the paper seeks to open up a potential epistemic space for rethinking the conception of identity and its immensely complex character in the contemporary world from a Marxist theoretical perspective.*

**Keywords**: Maoism, Nepal, Ethnic identity, Practical ideology, Indigenous nationalities.

## Introduction

The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) [CPN(M)] launched an armed insurrection against the state of Nepal, better known as the 'People's War', on 12 February 1996 by targeting police stations in the districts of Rolpa, Rukum and Sindhuli along with an agricultural bank in Gorkha. Incidentally, the two adjacent districts of Rolpa and Rukum in the western part of the country were home to the Kham Magars, a marginalised indigenous nationality or *janajati* group within Nepal. Subsequently, these two districts were made the base area from which the insurrection started operating.[1]While being interviewed

[1] David N.Gellner, "Caste, Ethnicity and Inequality in Nepal", *Economic and Political Weekly* 42, no.20 (May 2007): 1826, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4419601.

by Li Onesto in 1999,[2] Pushpa Kamal Dahal (popularly known as Prachanda), the key ideologue and theoretician of the CPN(M) stated:

> And in western Nepal there are Mongolian ethnic groups – you saw how all our comrades there look Chinese. These nationalities are so sincere and such brave fighters – historically they have had this kind of culture. And upper caste chauvinism and feudal ties do not prevail in these nationalities.[3]

Thus, in a very idiosyncratic manner, Prachanda evokes the 'ethnic essence' of the Kham Magars and eventually aligns it with his greater political agenda of class struggle by tracing the 'primitive communist' tendencies prevailing in the minds of these indigenous nationalities. Hence, in more ways than one, Prachanda, rather than using historical materialist explanations to arrive at the issue of ethnicity, talks about the primordial essence of ethnicity first, and then causally attaches it to the Marxist idea of class.

This 'reversal' of historical materialism opens up a window for us to study the Maoist movement in Nepal from a very specific perspective, that is, how the abstract ideology of Marxism or Maoism, when deployed in practice, in a region like Nepal, is reshaped and redefined when interacting with people belonging to the *janajati* groups. Therefore, the present essay aims to examine the Maoist movement and the Janajati movement in a reflexive manner and demonstrate how non-class, identitarian claims, like those of ethnicity, were accommodated within the ambit of the Maoist political project and deemed as a valid party line. Keeping in mind the temporal bracket of 1996-2006 – the exact period of the Maoist 'People's War' – this essay would also delve into the everyday life-worlds of various indigenous nationalities of Nepal like the Thangmis, Kham Magars, Tamangs, etc. who became hegemonic supporters of Maoism, and map, how ethnicity, accompanied by religiosity, dialectically established its relationship with Maoism, radically altering its very theoretical doctrine.

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[2] Ibid.

[3] Prachanda, "Red Flag Flying on the Roof of the World" in *Understanding the Maoist Movement of Nepal*, ed. Deepak Thapa (Martin Chautari, 2003), 187.

## Theoretical Outline: Identity and Ideology

Before engaging ourselves with an extensive discussion about the Maoist movement and its relationship with marginalised ethnic groups in Nepal, we must lay bare the theoretical tools that this paper wishes to utilise. When Maoism confronts ethno-religious social groups in Nepal, how can we address this particular fact in the general language of theory? – It is *ideology* confronting *identity*. Before advancing further, there is a paramount need to separately define these two terms. When dealing with the concept of ideology, we promptly turn to the writings of Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. There are two central bulwarks in the Gramscian idea of ideology, according to Woolcock: first, ideology is any organic link connecting structure and superstructure.

> Gramsci conceives ideology as class project, whereby a project emerging from a fundamental class interest becomes elaborated at the level of the productive system, but is transformed into a project of organisation directed towards society as a whole. The class which carries out this transformation is able to reinforce its power over society by virtue of its decisive function in the nucleus of economic activities.[4]

The second Gramscian bulwark in relation to ideology is when ideology is deemed as a 'practice producing subjects.[5]

> Ideology […] is the battlefield, the terrain of the struggle, since men's acquisition of consciousness does not come about individually, but through the intermediary of the ideological terrain where two hegemonic principles confront each other. It is, therefore, through ideology, that subjects are created and through ideology rooted in the economic conditions of life that they act.[6]

Fusing these two signifiers of ideology, we can arrive at a fuller understanding of what an 'organic ideology' can mean –

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[4] Joseph A. Woolcock, "Politics, Ideology and Hegemony in Gramsci's Theory", *Social and Economic Studies* 34, no. 3 (September 1985): 205, https://www.jstor.org/stable/27862802.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid., 206.

> An organic ideology is able to organise social groups and direct them throughout all their activities. […] These organisers (organic intellectuals) are the agents of this practice. They are the ones […] in charge of elaborating and spreading organic ideologies and who will have to realise the moral and intellectual reform. This role of intellectuals both at the levels of class organisations (political parties) and the hegemonic apparatuses, is crucial for maintaining class hegemony as well as the emergence of counter-hegemonic forms of class struggle.[7]

Hence, in the end, when talking about the concept of ideology in everyday life, Gramsci also juxtaposes the role of activism with that of ideology. Now, we come to the conception of identity itself. Laid down in simplistic terms, identity can be defined as the mode of self-recognition adopted by an individual or group. Thus, the Marxist idea of class can be considered as one form of identity, that is, a means adopted by one and/or many to self-recognise themselves. But there is a radical difference between identity couched in class terms, and identity couched in non-class terms like age, religion, language, region and so on, and that difference is: a stress on class identity will never lead to a political praxis based on identity, while a stress on non-class identitarian markers would most definitely lead to identity politics. According to Sonia Kruks, as discussed in Raju Das, identity politics can be characterised by

> its demand for recognition on the basis of the very grounds on which recognition has previously been denied: it is qua women, qua blacks, qua lesbians that groups demand recognition. The demand is not for inclusion within the fold of "universal humankind" on the basis of shared human attributes; nor is it for respect "in spite of" one's differences. Rather, what is demanded is respect for oneself as different.[8]

That being said, we must not readily assume that all politics espousing the primacy of class identity and class struggle most definitely resist any non-class identitarian claims and aims for the latter's total erasure. On the contrary,

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[7] Ibid.

[8] Raju Das, "Identity Politics", *Class, Race and Corporate Power* 8, no. 1 (2020): 5, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/48645490.

> While class has primacy, that does not mean there are no non-class relations or that they do not matter. Class divisions/ processes/ relations support, and are supported by, non-class divisions/ processes/ relations. While the major problems of humanity are not fundamentally caused by mechanisms of social oppression (e.g. gender or racial oppression or oppression of homosexuals), social oppression has indeed much influence on class society, on the exploited people. It can influence which groups are more exploited and which groups suffer more because of the problems created by class relations. […] The primacy of class means the primacy of class politics (which aims to abolish class and build socialist society). But class politics does not mean there is no other form of politics.[9]

In sharp contrast to this creed of class politics,

> 'Identity politics' is a system of politics within which there are two interrelated components: the politics of recognition/respect and the politics of limited economic distribution, with the former being the dominant component and influencing the latter element. The economic distribution in question is generally within narrow sectors defined on the basis of identity (e.g. academic jobs for women or blacks), without any linkage to the agenda of the abolition of class relations that cause inequality. The aim of identity politics is to hide/downplay class politics.[10]

Nonetheless, the crucial question remains – how does Marxism deal with the simultaneous co-existence of non-class identities adjacent to class? The answer of a dialectician would be the following: A revolutionary politics of class struggle must not only signify an extrinsic, actual struggle against one's class enemies but also cater to the intrinsic, ideational struggle to hold onto class as the primary identitarian marker guiding political praxis and actively resist the tendency of secondary and tertiary non-class identities trying to assume primacy.

[9] Ibid., 16-18.

[10] Ibid., 5.

On this note, we must return to Gramsci's thought again –

> The development of ideologies in Gramsci thus takes the form of a circular movement that at certain moments is characterized by intensification and organisation, and at others by crisis and decay. The scale ranging from incoherence/disintegration at one end, to unity/organicity at the other, sees ideology deriving from the latter of these two poles, in strict relationship with a given social group, before taking an independent, unforeseen direction, disintegrating and coming together again in another form when said social group declines.[11]

It is in keeping with this prologue on theoretical understandings about ideology and identity in mind, that we now must focus on our actual theme - the relationship between the ideology of Maoism on the one hand and the marginalised ethnic groups in Nepal on the other hand.

## The Nepali State, Indigenous Nationalities and Communist Praxis in pre-1990 Nepal

In 1768-69, Prithvi Narayan Shah, a high-caste Hindu ruler of the kingdom of Gorkha, conquered Nepal, ousting the erstwhile Malla kings from power.[12]This event marked not only the beginning of the first phase of Nepal's modern political history but also witnessed the consolidation and monopolisation of state power in the hands of the caste hill Hindu elite (CHHE).

> The CHHE gained power by imposing hill Hindu values – placing the *Bahun* (hill *Brahmin*) and *Chhetri* (hill *Kshetriya*) at the top of the caste hierarchy, presenting the hill Hindu monarchy as the state "unifier", and promoting their language Khaskura, as the national language (Khas-kura aka Nepali). In 1854, a civil code formalised and institutionalised the caste hierarchy, establishing a system of unequal rights and privileges in which lower castes were punished more

[11] Michele Filippini, *Using Gramsci* (Pluto Press, 2017), 13.

[12] Richard Burghart, "The Formation of the Concept of Nation-State in Nepal", *The Journal of Asian Studies* 44, no.1 (November 1984): 105, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2056748.

> severely for committing the same crime as someone from a higher caste. More than a century later, during the Panchayat period (1960-90), the monarchy strengthened the assimilation of the various ethnic groups into the dominant CHHE culture in the name of modernisation and development. The 1962 constitution formally declared Nepal as a Hindu kingdom, and hill Hindu culture, such as *daura suruwal* (the ruling class dress code), and hill nationalism were aggressively promoted. The result was further marginalisation of non-CHHE groups and the erosion of non-CHHE languages, religions, customs, lifestyles and traditions.[13]

Thus, the hegemonised ruling ideology of the Nepali state since Prithvi Narayan Shah's conquest was steeped in semi-feudalism in the sphere of the economy and CHHE socio-cultural domination in the superstructural sphere. Therefore, expropriation of workers and peasants was carried out by utilising the idiom of ethnicity.

> However, the imposition of ethnic hegemony did not take place in the absence of opposition. The fledgling Hindu kingdom faced several major rebellions and resistance movements in its first 30 years. […] By the early 20th century, the autocratic Rana regime that ruled Nepal from 1846–1951 had become so effective in suppressing opposition that no major ethnic rebellion occurred from 1900 until 1950. However, ethnic disaffection smoldered underneath the calm surface, and religious and ethnic leaders as well as activists, such as Phalgunanda (a Limbu reform movement activist in the 1930s–40s), Madhavraj Joshi (a Hindu reformist in the early 20th century), and Yogmaya (a leader of an anti-Brahminical Hindu women reform movement in the 1930s), were harassed, prosecuted or jailed. Furthermore, everyday forms of passive resistance, such as disregard of laws and dictates or refusal to pay taxes, posed challenges to the state in exerting its authority.[14]

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[13] Mahendra Lawoti, "Ethnic Politics and the Building of an Inclusive State," in *Nepal in Transition*, ed. Sebastian von Einsiedel, David M. Malone, and Suman Pradhan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 133.

[14] Ibid., 133-134.

This cursory glance at the history of the state of Nepal from the mid-eighteenth century onwards sufficiently throws light on the fact that Nepal's story of stepping into the temporality of modernity would remain incomplete without acknowledging ethnicity as the primary plane on which socio-political and counter-hegemonic struggles took place, since Prithvi Narayan Shah's conquest. Hence, it can be stated as a truism that any praxis of communist politics in Nepal would have to strive to dismantle the role of ethnicity as a primary identitarian marker and bring the idea of class in its stead. This is when we chose to turn to the history of communist politics in Nepal.

**Table 1**: Castes and Ethnic Groups in Nepal

| ***Parbatiyas*** **(40%)** | ***Newars*** **(5.6%)** | ***Ethnic Groups*** **(20%)** | ***Madhesias*** **(32%)** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Bahun (12.9%) | Brahman (0.1%) | Magars (7.2%) | Castes (16.1%) |
| Chhetri (16%) | Shrestha (1.0%) | Tamangs (5.5%) | Ethnic groups (9%) |
| | Bajrachaya/Shakya (0.8%) | Gurungs (2.5%) | |
| | Maharjan (3%) | | |

**Source**: Shobha Gautam et al., "Where There Are No Men" in *Understanding the Maoist Movement of Nepal*, ed. Deepak Thapa (Martin Chautari, 2003), 99.

The independence movement in India and the success of the communist revolution in China were vital twin factors in the spread of the communist ideology in Nepal. The first communist party in Nepal, the Nepal Communist Party (NCP), was formed in 1949 CE.[15]

> In the fifties, the main objective of the NCP as stated in its policy statement issued in 1951 was to transform Nepal into a republican state through violent revolution. However, in the 1950s the party adopted the Leninist strategy of provoking discontent by focusing on issues that were urban centered and elite oriented. […] At that time more than 97

[15] Narayan Khadka, "Factionalism in the Communist Movement in Nepal," *Pacific Affairs* 68, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 57, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2759768.

> percent of Nepal's population was rural and about 98 percent illiterate. Such a large section of the population was completely unaffected by the oppositional politics of the Nepal Communist Party. One major reason was that the party organisation was weak and the membership was small and drawn mainly from the urban population. This is evident from the poor performance of the NCP in the 1959 general elections.[16]

The situation for the communists in Nepal completely altered after King Mahendra's sudden dismissal of Nepal's first elected government in mid-December 1960.[17] This disavowal of democratic politics by the monarchy was followed by a universal ban on all political parties, communist and non-communist alike, and marked the introduction of the "partyless panchayat" system.[18] Although during the panchayat period, the NCP "underwent multiple splits, based on ideological, pragmatic, and personal differences,"[19] it was simultaneously characterised by the ideological intensification of communism in Nepal and its subsequent dissemination among rural masses. "Various estimates indicate that the general membership of the various communist parties increased from 5,000 in the 1950s to 10,000 in the 1980s."[20] According to Shneiderman,

> One of the most important factions to emerge during this period was the 'Jhapeli' group, which operated in the eastern border district of Jhapa and followed the Indian Naxalite doctrine developed by Charu Mazumdar, which drew heavily on Maoist ideology. […] After killing at least eight landlords, and experiencing several casualties among their own activists, the Jhapeli group eventually shifted away from the Naxalite line and began forging alliances with other less radical communist factions.[21]

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[16] Khadka, "Factionalism in the Communist Movement," 57.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Krishna Hachhethu, *Trajectory of Democracy in Nepal* (New Delhi: Adroit Publishers, 2015), 27.

[19] Sara Shneiderman, "Creating 'Civilized' Communists," in *Varieties of Activist Experience: Ethnographies of Politics in Modern Nepal*, ed. David N. Gellner (New Delhi: Sage Publications India, 2010), 50.

[20] Khadka, "Factionalism in the Communist Movement", 57.

[21] Shneiderman, "Creating 'Civilized' Communists", 50.

In 1978, the Communist Party of Nepal (Marxist-Leninist) [CPN-ML] was formed, whose core nucleus consisted of many well-known members of the Jhapeli group. It was during this period – late 1970s and the mid 1980s – that the CPN-ML cadres travelled to the Piskar area as part of their party's programme to map 'base areas' and develop support for the communist cause there. Later, at the end of the 1980s, the CPN-ML, in light of the global demise of communist dictatorship states, turned away from their own demand for a one-party communist state. "Along with other communist factions, they accepted the proposition that "conventional multi-party democracy could be a stage on the road to achieving *naulo janbad* [Mao's doctrine of New People's Democracy]", as an alternative to armed struggle".[22]After this notable change in party line, the CPN-ML eventually decided to wholeheartedly participate in the restoration of the democracy movement against the monarchy in 1990, and that too, alongside the bourgeois Nepali Congress (NC) party. When the 1990 movement achieved success and multi-party democracy was restored in Nepal, the CPN-ML merged with the CPN (Marxist) to become the CPN (Unified Marxist-Leninist) [CPN – UML, also known simply as UML] in 1991.[23]After getting gradually co-opted into the system of parliamentary democracy, the UML fully adopted the idea of *bahudaliya janbad* (multi-party democracy) as an end in itself, in sharp contrast to its previous line, which stressed *bahudaliya janbad* as a mere means to reach the final political end of *naulo janbad*. Hereafter, the UML became a mainstream opposition party in relation to the Nepali Congress (NC).

As our above discussion shows, various communist parties in Nepal, in variegated points in their historical time, adopted the doctrine of armed class struggle against the Nepali monarchical state. Notably, after the beginning of the panchayat era, communism as an ideology was able to reach the rural masses of Nepal, among which there were significant populations who belonged to marginalised *janajati* groups (more on this later). Hence, there was ample scope for a confrontation between Marxism/Maoism as an ideology and the 'ethnic consciousness' of various *janajati* groups; but how did the pre-1990 communists in Nepal choose to deal with the issue of expropriated ethnicity? Shneiderman answers our query in the following manner:

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid., 51.

> The attitudes of the cadres who interacted with Thangmi [an expropriated *janjati* group] villagers in Piskar during the early phase of the communist politicization project there reveal a great deal about the internalised class and caste prejudices that motivated many communist activists, despite their ideological disavowals of such differences. They saw themselves as the architects of a radical social transformation that required all participants to give up 'primitive', localised ethnic identities in favour of a 'modern', homogeneous national identity. From the beginning of their attempts to create a modern peasantry through the discourse of class struggle, the CPN has consistently viewed the competing discourse of ethnic empowerment as secondary.[24]

Mukta Tamang, while discussing caste and ethnic issues in the policy documents of the CPN, argues that "despite the policy formulation during the formative periods, the issue of caste and ethnicity remained marginal in the party discourse and practice in the whole history of the communist political movement [in Nepal] until 1990."[25]

Thus, until 1990, there was a certain consensus among the various communist factions in Nepal that no matter what, the identity of class must have primary status when practising and spreading the ideology of communism. Moreover, there was also a tendency among Nepali communists to actively resist other, non-class identitarian signifiers like ethnicity, which attempted to assume primary status. Therefore, if we return to the theoretical framework which was discussed above, in the context of pre-1990 Nepal, communist praxis not only conducted a political struggle against one's actual class enemies like the monarchy and landed elites but also attempted to wage an intrinsic struggle to maintain the centrality of the identity of class as the paramount grammar of politics.

Then again, why does Mukta Tamang mention 'until 1990' in the CPN policy documents when talking about the secondary nature of non-class identities

[24] Ibid., 48.

[25] Ibid.

like ethnicity and caste with regard to communism in Nepal? Did this model of a 'dual class struggle' suffer any kind of setback? If so, then why? In order to answer these complex queries, we must turn to the next section, which will focus on the period between 1990 (the restoration of multi-party democracy) and 1996 (the beginning of the Maoist People's War), and elucidate on how this marked a critical juncture for communism in Nepal.

**Multi-party Democracy and the Rise of the Janajati Movement**

The year 1990 witnessed the first people's movement (*jan andolan*) against the Shah monarchy, demanding the restoration of multi-party democracy in the country. The success of this movement was also followed by the promulgation of a constitution recognising the 'multi-ethnic' and 'multi-lingual' character of the nation. Furthermore, Article 18 recognised the cultural and educational right of every community to "preserve and promote its own language, script and culture."[26] Also,

> By using the term *Janajati* explicitly in Article 26(10), the 1990 Constitution acknowledged their presence, and by requiring the state to commit itself to policies and programmes that specifically assisted the *Janajatis* to overcome their social and economic disadvantages and promote their languages, literatures and cultures, it acknowledged their relative deprivation in social and economic terms. With respect to fundamental rights, Article 12 of the 1990 Constitution guaranteed the freedom of expression and the right to organize.[27]

Hence, the post-1990 political climate in Nepal was highly conducive to the gradual development of an 'ethnic consciousness' among the ostracised *janajati* groups and the subsequent organisation of a full-fledged Adivasi Janajati movement, which, unlike the communist ideology, laid express emphasis on ethnicity as the most crucial identitarian facet in the realm of political praxis. Since Prithvi Narayan Shah's conquest, the epoch inaugurated

[26] Pratyoush Onta and Devraj Humagain, "Janajati Magazines and the Contents of the Subaltern Counterpublic Sphere during the 1990s," in *Political Change and Public Culture in Post-1990 Nepal*, ed. Michael Hutt and Pratyoush Onta (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 103.

[27] Ibid.

by the 1990 Constitution was the first time that the indigenous nationalities in the nation had a legal mandate to assert autonomous claims about their culture, religion, language, etc. and to organise themselves specifically along ethnic lines. In the editorial of the first issue of the journal named *Janajati Manch*, it stated:

> Janajatis are present in significant numbers in Nepal. They have been exploited in economic, religious, educational, cultural, political and social domains … Janajatis have their own rituals, traditions, religions, cultures and lifestyles. These can be taken as beautiful ornaments of Nepal. But in Nepal, Hindu Aryans are trying to annihilate these ornaments by rusting them (sic) as if they were made of iron.[28]

Moreover, immediately after the decimation of the party less panchayat regime in April 1990, "eight ethnic organisations came together to form what was then called the Nepali Janajati Mahasangh (Nepal Federation of Nationalities, or NEFEN for short [sic]."[29] Hereafter, the United Nations declared the year 1993 as the World Indigenous Peoples' Year and the decade 1995-2004 as the International Decade of the World Indigenous Peoples.[30] These declarations from an internationally acclaimed body like the UN further crystallised the impetus behind ethnic organisation.

The Adivasi Janajati movement, therefore, identified the caste hill Hindu elite (CHHE) groups not as a class oppressor but an *ethnic oppressor*. Centuries of a certain kind of cultural imperialism by the King-Bahun-Chhetri combine, which intensified manifold during the party-less panchayat regime with its invocation of '*ek bhasa ek bhes; ek jati ek des*' (one language, one dress; one culture, one nation)[31] successfully sidelined the class agenda propagated by the communists pre-1990 and brought the ethnic agenda to the forefront. Furthermore, it can also be argued that the co-option of the CPN-UML into mainstream, multi-party, parliamentary politics and its repeated failure to capture state power further weakened the ideology of class struggle and

[28] Ibid., 107.

[29] Pratyoush Onta, "The Growth of the Ādivāsī Janajāti Movement in Nepal after 1990," *Studies in Nepali History and Society* 11, no. 2 (December 2006): 308.

[30] Ibid., 310.

[31] Onta & Humagain, "Janajati Magazines", 106.

revived ethnicity as the primary identitarian marker in the everyday psyche of the subaltern classes of Nepal.

Here, we come back to Gramsci again – his theorisation on ideology as a circular movement between incoherence/disintegration and unity/organicity must be mentioned again.[32] With respect to the deployment of the communist ideology in Nepal, it can be stated that the period between 1960 and 1990 marked a phase of unity/organicity for it, while from 1990 to 1996, it was relatively facing disintegration in the face of a very strong and rising current of ethnicity-based activism guided by an 'ethnic consciousness'.

In the next and final section of this essay, we turn to trace the history of interactions between Marxist/Maoist activists and the *adivasi janajati* groups, keeping in mind the ideology-identity dialectics that were in play in relation to the Nepali body politic.

**Maoism as 'Practical Ideology': Towards Ethno-Marxism?**

Although the Peoples' War, which began in 1996 under the leadership of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) [CPN-M)] was undoubtedly the communist movement *par excellence* in the country and forms the central thematic of this paper, we must start with the activities of factions like the CPN-ML in order to get a fuller picture of the relationship between Marxism/Maoism and the indigenous nationalities. Piskar is a village in the Sindhupalchok district of central-eastern Nepal.

> Piskar's Thangmi [an indigenous nationality group] villagers had suffered from various forms of exploitation at the hands of predominantly Bahun, Chhetri and Newar landholders. Highly inequitable landholding relations were at the root of other forms of exploitation, such as indentured labour and usurious money-lending practices. […] 6.58 per cent of the population owned 47 per cent of the land, while 73.68 per cent of the population was classified as poor or landless, and altogether owned only 31 per cent of the land. […] The 2001 Nepal census showed 834 Thangmi residents in the Piskar Village

[32] Filippini, *Using Gramsci*, 13.

> Development Committee (VDC) or 38 per cent of the population. In the adjacent VDC of Chokati, Thangmi accounted for 46 per cent of the population.[33]

Hence, there was a deep interrelation between agrarian poverty and the Thangmi ethnic identity in regions like Piskar. Shneiderman, in her ethnography, mentions people like Amrit Kumar Bohara, himself a resident of Piskar and later a CPN-ML member, as an "organic intellectual" (in the Gramscian sense) who played a significant role in organising expropriated Thangmi villagers along class lines.[34] This communist activism in Piskar from the late 1970s onwards by people like Bohara, Madhav Paudel and Asta Laxmi Shakya culminated in the Piskar massacre of 1984, wherein a police party, accompanied by the Deputy Superintendent of Police (DSP) interrupted a *jatra*/festival organised by the CPN-ML on the day of Maghe Sankranti, and opened fire on the villagers, killing two Thangmi villagers (Bir Bahadur Thami and Ile Thami) who were subsequently declared martyrs by the CPN-ML.[35]

Elsewhere, Anna de Sales draws our attention to a biographical ethnography of a communist activist known as Barman Budha Magar from the Kham Magar *janajati*. According to de Sales,

> As a Communist and a Magar, Barman stands at the crossroads of two different, even potentially antagonistic, movements that have dominated Nepalese political life since 1990: the Communists, including the Maoists, aim at the ideal of a nation of equal citizens through the 'class struggle', irrespective of all distinctions of caste and ethnic group. By contrast, ethnic movements fight for the recognition of the various *jatis*, or nationalities, and the eventual establishment of autonomous regions.[36]

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[33] Shneiderman, "Creating 'Civilized' Communists", 56-57.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Sara Beth Shneiderman, "The Formation of Political Consciousness in Rural Nepal," *Dialectical Anthropology* 33, nos. 3–4 (December 2009): 299–300, https://www.jstor.org/stable/29790890.

[36] Anna De Sales, "The Biography of a Magar Communist," in *Varieties of Activist Experience: Ethnographies of Politics in Modern Nepal*, ed. David N. Gellner (New Delhi: Sage Publications India, 2010), 18.

We will have an opportunity very shortly to portray that De Sales is mistaken when she states that the Maoists only focused on class struggle and were not able to accommodate ethnicity-based demands for autonomy, but her larger point regarding Barman Magar in the quoted passage still holds ground.
Barman Budha was influenced by communists like Mohan Bikram Singh when he, along with two other comrades, visited Barman's village, Thabang. The villagers of Thabang heard Singh speak about Marx, Lenin and Mao; communist books translated into Nepali were distributed, and the villagers were encouraged to organise themselves in a sort of commune where everything would be done collectively.[37] De Sales states that, "not once in the course of our discussions did Barman claim to represent Magar culture or identity, nor did he claim to be fighting for it. As a matter of fact, mention of ethnic protest was remarkably absent from his discourse."[38]

Nevertheless, ethnicity as a secondary identitarian marker did rear its head in Barman Budha's interview with De Sales. When the new Parliament met in Kathmandu in 1991, Barman Budha, representing the United Peoples' Front (UPF), was elected from Rolpa. When Barman arrived in Kathmandu for the first Parliament meeting, he was wearing his village dress - a short kilt and velvet shirt. Seeing this, his own party members, especially the general secretary of UPF, insisted that he change into the Nepali dress of *daura suruwal.* To this insistence, Barman replied: "What I am wearing now, I have always worn and so did my ancestors. If I can't wear this in front of the king, then why should I stay here? I don't mind going back to the village."[39] Finally, when the king came, Barman Budha was still wearing his village dress.

De Sales asks her readers, "How are we to understand his [Barman Budha's] eccentricity on this point?"[40] De Sales goes on to answer her own query in the following manner: "In the general context of the 1991 elections, the ethnic issue provides an obvious first interpretation of what looked like a provocative stand against the dominant Nepali culture, which minorities began to question openly."[41] Although I do not disagree with De Sales' answer, the theoretical

[37] Ibid., 29.
[38] Ibid., 37.
[39] Ibid., 36-37.
[40] Ibid., 37.
[41] Ibid.

framework of this paper might look at Barman Budha's rejection of the *daura suruwal* in a different manner.

For the communist Barman Budha Magar, even though class was the primary identitarian marker for him, that did not result in class being his only identity. Hence, Barman's Magar ethnicity, as a secondary/ tertiary identitarian signifier, came to the fore during the above-mentioned incident because, in the sartorial sphere, his own party members were trying to erase his ethnic identity and were trying to override it with the identity of homogenous, national belonging. For Barman, this tendency needed resistance, but the idea of a 'dual class struggle' was maintained, since class remained his primary identitarian marker; his 'ethnic consciousness' still followed the language of class. Thus, the author of this paper would differ with de Sales that 'the ethic issue provides an obvious first interpretation' in relation to Barman's 'eccentricity' – the explanation must be couched in the language of class, keeping in mind the fact that the 'dominant Nepali culture' was the culture of the CHHE class, the principal expropriators of the workers and peasants of Nepal.

That being said, this positive dialectical tension between ideology and identity in Barman Budha's psyche is due to his belonging to a generation (he was already 61 years old when he decided to contest the 1991 elections)[42] which actively advocated the centrality of class struggle. Thus, communists like Barman Budha Magar can be posed as the exception attached to the law that had gripped the Nepali polity post-1990: class consciousness was vehemently eclipsed by ethnic consciousness. If that is truly the case, then how did the People's War gather such widespread support for their cause primarily from indigenous nationality groups themselves? The time has come to engage with the equation at last, which forms the critical core of this paper.

The communist faction, which called itself the Communist Party of Nepal (Unity Centre) [CPN (Unity Centre)], boycotted the parliamentary elections of 1994 and adopted a new name – Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) [CPN (Maoist)] – in February 1995, and decided that they would launch a protracted

[42] Ibid., 36.

people's war against the Nepali state.[43] Since 1990, socio-political movements in Nepal, like the movement for the restoration of democracy (MRD) and even the Adivasi Janajati movement had an inherent urban petit-bourgeois class constitution. Although both these movements affected rural dwellers also, it was the professional and political class (school/university teachers, lawyers, doctors, politicians from erstwhile left parties) who found themselves in the vanguard of these struggles.[44] Moreover, the majority of the communist factions had also abandoned their 'base areas' of class struggle and joined the parliamentary mainstream. Therefore, there was a sense of betrayal and extreme marginalisation in the collective rural consciousness of Nepal, which was successfully channelised by the CPN (Maoist) when it launched its protracted war. The Maoists tried to revive the organicity of the communist ideology in a renewed, radical fashion. "The party inevitably contextualised the ideology of class struggle with poverty, injustice and exploitation."[45] According to an International Crisis Group (ICG) report –

> Much of their [the Maoists] attraction has stemmed not from the resonance of Maoist theory among poor and often illiterate villagers, but from the frequently inescapable logic of a general population that feels at best poorly served by their government and at worst preyed on by officials. Early Maoist attacks were effective in capturing the public's imagination because they targeted some of the most obvious signs of inequality in the form of local upper caste politicians, police posts, the judiciary, rural banks and land revenue offices'[46]. Hence, the Peoples' War began by heavily emphasising the ideology of the annihilation of class enemies and the establishment of a 'new democratic socio-economic system and state.[47]

Although the political intensity of the People's War had no parallels in the history of Nepal, it was not the first call to an armed struggle by communists. Where the People's War achieved profound ideological novelty was in relation to the dialectic between ideology and identity. In sharp contrast to earlier

[43] Hachhethu, *Trajectory of Democracy in Nepal*, 175.

[44] Ibid., 16; Onta, "The Growth of the Ādivāsī Janajāti Movement," 322.

[45] Hacchethu, *Trajectory of Democracy*, 177.

[46] Ibid., 177-178.

[47] Ibid., 177.

communist parties in Nepal, who actively worked among subaltern classes to advocate the primacy of class only, the CPN-Maoist line attempted to fuse class and ethnicity simultaneously under one revolutionary umbrella. In other words, the Maoists wanted to purposefully accommodate the rising tide of "ethnic consciousness" in post-1990 Nepal under the rubric of their greater ideological goal. The Maoist scheme of state restructuring included demands like: (a) declaration of Nepal as a secular state, (b) equal treatment of all languages, (c) ethnic and regional-based autonomy and right to self-determination and (d) special policy for the promotion of interests of Dalits and women. These demands directly aligned with the ethnic and minority agenda.[48]

In 2001, Pushpa Kamal Dahal/Prachanda, the Chairman of the CPN-Maoist, submitted a theoretical thesis – *The Great Leap Forward: An Inevitable Need of History* - in the Party's Second National Conference, which was subsequently adopted by the CPN-Maoist as the '*Prachanda Path'* – an ideological path suited to the historical specificities of Nepal, especially in the light of the ongoing People's War.[49] In this document, under the header 'On Party Mass-line', is written the following (and I quote it at length):

> Serious studies of the development of the historical peculiarities of Nepalese Society and formulation of ethnic and regional policies on the basis of the scientific theory of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism, and their implementation is another important part of the Party mass-line. The guarantee of progress and emancipation of a great majority of total population victimised by exploitation, suppression, and discrimination of Hindu feudal 'high' caste chauvinism of century-old reactionary state and deprived of economic, political, religious and cultural rights, is the objective of ethnic and regional policy of the Party. The honour and recognition of the right of suppressed nationalities to self-determination and the programme of the establishment of national autonomy clarifies the proletarian policy on it of the Party. It has already been stated that this policy expresses the characteristic of era [*sic*] imperialism and proletarian revolution about the fusion of

[48] Ibid., 179.

[49] Prachanda, "Interview with Comrade Prachanda," in *Understanding the Maoist Movement of Nepal*, ed. Deepak Thapa (Kathmandu: Martin Chautari, 2003), 219.

> proletarian revolutionary movement and ethnic liberation movement into each other in the peculiarity of Nepalese society. The policy which aims at developing fronts and organisations of the oppressed nationalities and regions, and guaranteeing their participation in the local and central new democratic states has been playing a role of historic importance and shall be doing so in making the gigantic part of Nepalese Society jump into the political process.
>
> This policy represents the only scientific method to make millions of the suppressed nationalities including Magar, Gurung, Tamang, Rai, Limbu, Tharu, Newar, Karnali Pradesh participate in the great journey of revolution. Highly evaluating the economic and political importance of the Terai, the Party is laying emphasis on the programme of regional autonomy for the Madheshee community as against the discrimination and oppression of the old state. The Party offers high priority to involving the Madheshee Community in revolution. Its historic importance lies in the development of Nepalese national unity against Indian monopoly capitalism. The Party is stressing on the policy to organise and revolutionise the Dalits, i.e. depressed community, who are the masters of basic labours and number more than 15% of total population, but most suppressed by the inhuman atrocities of the old state, for a battle of equality and freedom. This is the speciality of our Party policy related to the Dalits to ensure their liberation and participation in the state with privilege.
>
> After the initiation of the People's War, this part of the masses also has been rapidly advancing in the process of revolt. The Party intends to lay further emphasis on the necessity to put into practice more effectively the correct policies on the mass-line which it has developed in the Nepalese particularity.'[50]

This 'Prachanda Path' went a long way in strengthening and disseminating the ideology of the People's War among those subaltern social groups of the country who were, till now, only mute onlookers, and veritably transformed

[50] Prachanda, "The Great Leap Forward," *The Worker* 7, last modified 26 January 2012, https://www.bannedthought.net/Nepal/Worker/Worker-07/GreatLeapForward-Prachanda-010200.htm.

them into active supporters. Recognised ethnic organisations like the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) "had to confront the fact that some prominent *janājati* leaders, including its founding general secretary Suresh Ale Magar, joined the Maoist party."[51]

> Between 1998 and 2000, the Maoists formed seven ethnic-based and two regional-based front organisations. The Maoists could penetrate in and expand their armed activities in the eastern hills and tarai region only after the party's ethnic and regional-based front organisations began to work. Furthermore, based on ethnicity and regionalism, the CPN (Maoist) adopted a federal structure with its nine autonomous regional governments.[52]

Thus, the "ethnicisation of class ideology"[53] bestowed upon the Peoples' War with an immense sense of strength. The first page of *Janasatta Sanchalan Nirdeshika* (Directions for Operating People's Power), a publication by the United Revolutionary People's Council (URPC) [a political mechanism designed by the Maoists aimed to act as a counter-state in their principal 'base areas'] stated:

> The new communist power accepts the right to self-determination of oppressed nationalities and regions and would like to say that troubles of nationalities and regions *are both different and continuous with those of classes.* In the present age, subject to imperialistic oppression, only a movement led by the working class can make the oppressed nationalities and regions fully and really free. That is why the present new communist power is applying policies and programmes to secure the rights of the people's community of oppressed nationalities and regions by means of autonomy or self-governance of the nationalities and regions [emphasis mine].[54]

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[51] Onta, "The Growth of the Ādivasi Janajāti Movement", 327.

[52] Hacchethu, *Trajectory of Democracy in Nepal*, 179.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Kiyoko Ogura, "Maoist People's Governments, 2001–2005," in *Local Democracy in South Asia*, ed. David N. Gellner and Krishna Hachhethu (New Delhi: Sage Publications India, 2008), 199.

Documents like the above push us towards a possible postulation that the CPN-Maoist were vehemently trying to deploy Maoism as a 'practical ideology' by bending the theoretical ideology of Marxism/Maoism (which only gives primacy to the identity of class) and juxtaposing it with the identitarian signifier of ethnicity. As Shneiderman states,

> Practical ideology is just as ideological, or hegemonic, as theoretical ideology, and therefore can play an equal, if not superior, role in fostering local political consciousness. Both are necessary for the long-term success of any hegemonic movement; their relationship might be seen as analogous to the one Gramsci posits between "spontaneity" and "conscious leadership". Spontaneity is the unpremeditated political action of the masses, while "conscious leadership" refers to the premeditated strategies of educated leaders.[55]

But in light of this 'practical ideology' developed by the Maoists during the People's War, how was the *theoretical* idea of a 'dual class struggle' (that is, class struggles against external enemies along with a struggle to maintain class as the primary identity) affected? Did that lead to the negation of the positive dialectic between ideology and identity? – We hope to address these queries by now focusing on how Maoist activism made a place in the everyday life of *janajati* groups during the People's War.

The first aspect of *janajati* everyday life we turn to is religion. Thabang village in Nepal is situated in the northern part of Rolpa, bordering the Rukum and Baglung districts. This village is populated by the Kham Magar *janajati* group along with the service castes of Damai and Kami. "During the People's War, Thabang was known as the capital of the Maoist base area where the Maoists' 'people's government' (*jan sarkar*) functioned as a parallel state from 1997."[56] At a glance, the Maoists were staunch anti-religious propagandists, but if we dig deeper into this Maoist political psyche, we would find instances where they took an accommodative stance towards non-Hindu, *janajati* religious practices as part of their praxis of 'practical ideology'. For example, the Kham

[55] Shneiderman, "The Formation of Political Consciousness", 304.

[56] Ina Zharkevich, "'When Gods Return to Their Homeland in the Himalayas,'" in *Religion, Secularism, and Ethnicity in Contemporary Nepal*, ed. David N. Gellner, Sondra L. Hausner, and Chiara Letizia (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016), 80.

Magars are known to worship the dead spirits of their ancestors. A highly venerated spirit of the Magars is Barbhai Braha, who is believed to be residing in the highest peak of Rolpa called Jaljala. Jaljala is the site where a religious festival is celebrated, principally by the Magars, every year. "Despite the special connection of the Brahas and the Jaljala Festival to Kham Magars, pilgrims from other districts come to attend the fair, making a pilgrimage of up to four days."[57]

The Maoists, instead of banning the Jaljala Festival as part of their anti-religious rhetoric, not only allowed its observance but also utilised income from the festival to fund the People's War. Moreover, the money from the festival was also used to "replace one of the four decaying stone shrines, *Buju Than*, with a temple built in Hindu style."[58] On the other hand,

> over the war years the locus of religious activity gradually shifted from communal worship at sacred sites to individual worship in the courtyard of one's house. […] the practice of worshipping from one's home was a response to the 'exceptional' times of war, its physical and political insecurities.[59]

Thus, we observe a divergent trend when it came to religious worship among the Kham Magars in Thabang under Maoist tutelage – although the Maoists supported the occurrence of the Jaljala festival, there was a tendency among the local Magars to 'privatise' their faith and refrain from communal worship, even in post-war times. As Zharkevich states, "It [privatisation of *Braha* worship] was not an act *against* the Maoist religious policies but rather *for* preserving and securing one's own beliefs."[60] Therefore, in Thabang during Peoples' War, there was the persistence of a mutual accommodative strategy between the Maoists and their Kham Magar supporters – while on the one hand the Maoists 'revised' their anti-religious policy and accommodated the occurrence of the Jaljala Festival, on the other hand many of the local Kham Magars 'privatised' their *Braha* worship keeping the political intensity of the Peoples' War in mind.

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[57] Ibid., 83.
[58] Ibid., 86.
[59] Ibid, 93-95.
[60] Ibid, 93.

Next, we turn to the Tamang *janajati* group (who are traditional followers of Buddhism) and their relationship with Maoism. According to a Maoist guerrilla warrior interviewed by Li Onesto, who belongs to the Tamang indigenous national group:

> The main reason I joined the people's army is because there is discrimination by Hindu chauvinism, by the reactionary ruling class against the indigenous people. I belong to the Tamang people, one of the oppressed nationalities of Nepal. This group doesn't have any opportunities in the government and the ruling sectors, and we have been oppressed by the reactionary Hindu state. I came to understand that, in order to get free from this kind of oppression, we cannot do this without picking up the gun, because the reactionary state power rules over us with the gun. This is why I joined the people's army.[61]

The reason why the relationship between Maoism and the Tamang Buddhists becomes interesting and complex is because Buddhism as a religious creed heavily emphasises on the path of non-violence, while Maoism as an ideology must expressly follow the rationale of armed struggle; but as Steinmann states, "The Tamangs who engaged in violent struggles in the name of Maoism did not at first see any major contradiction between being Buddhist and the necessity to take up arms."[62] There was even a Maoist war song in the Tamang language, composed by Sano Babu Tamang, which had parts which went like this:

> Even if my blood must be spilt
> Even if the ground must become red and wet with my blood
> We must destroy the liars' regime
> I am ready to go
> I am ready to fight![63]

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[61] Li Onesto, "Report from the People's War in Nepal," in *Understanding the Maoist Movement of Nepal*, ed. Deepak Thapa (Kathmandu: Martin Chautari, 2003), 176.

[62] Brigette Steinmann, "Confrontations between Maoists and Buddhists in Nepal," in *Religion, Secularism and Ethnicity in Contemporary Nepal*, ed. David N. Gellner, Sondra L. Hausner, and Chiara Letizia (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016), 373.

[63] Ibid.,374.

In another context, Bhikkhu Ananda's becoming not only a Maoist supporter but also a member of parliament representing the Maoists in 2008 presents to us an oxymoronic case, and a possible lens to grasp the dialectics between ideology and identity. Ananda was a Theravada monk who was trained in Sri Lanka. When asked by an interviewer from the *Nepali Times* – "If you don't believe in violence, how did you ever fall in with the Maoists?"[64] Ananda answered:

> After training to be a monk in Sri Lanka for 20 years, I returned to Nepal in 2001. After witnessing the violence here, like other monks, I wanted to convince people to turn against violence, which required that I stay close to Maoist fighters, which is why I'm officially a Maoist CA member. *But I'm humanitarian, not a Maoist* [emphasis mine].[65]

In Ananda's case, we witness the play of a 'negative dialectic' between ideology and identity. Although Ananda is an official Constituent Assembly member representing the Maoists, *he is not a Maoist* himself. He espouses his Buddhist identity in full throttle and refrains from referring to the ideology of class as a whole. The intensification of this negative dialectic is also evidenced by the fact that Sano Babu Tamang, the composer of the above song, later broke with the Maoist-Prachanda path and went on to draft the charter of *Tamsaling* - a new political and linguistic territory claimed by Tamangs solely based on ethnic identity[66].

Even the ethnic fronts like the Magar National Liberation Front (MNLF) and Magar Liberation Front (MLF) affiliated to the CPN-Maoist were caught amidst the play of this negative dialectic. Both these fronts demanded the creation of an autonomous Magarant region within Nepal, much like Tamsaling. The fact that ethnicity was gaining ground as a primary identity at the cost of class is apparent in the MLF's posing its demand in relation to Magarant: 'In this new state, only those of Magar or indigenous blood would be granted membership and the right to vote. Only one party – the MLF – would be allowed within it, and "only Magars would be allowed to function as leaders of any political party within the state … all non-Magars and non-

[64] Ibid., 378.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Ibid., 391.

indigenous outsiders should leave the Magarant Nation (State) for the good of all." Against the background of this *very uncompromising programme*, point 18 reads ironically: "We demand the abolition of international and national racial, economic and political imperialism in Nepal" [emphasis mine].[67] On the other hand, a book written by Lok Bahadur Thapa Magar by the MNLF, although methodologically aligned with historical materialism and quoted communist leaders like Marx, Lenin, Stalin and Mao, *it was a history of the Magar ethnic group dressed in the rhetoric of Marxism*.[68] Lecomte-Tilouine states the following when talking about Lok Bahadur –

> Lok Bahadur Thapa Magar seems to be caught between two fires: on the one hand, he expresses that it is very painful for him to see Magars having the same discourse as *bahunvadis*, thus revealing his very sensitive *jati* identity, but on the other hand he criticises those who think only in terms of *jati* – which is a surprising declaration in a book intended to promote ethnic autonomy .[69]

Again, we observe the dialectical tension between ideology and identity, but here, like the instances discussed above, the nature of the dialectic is negative. Yet, a critical query haunts this present analysis – what is the causality behind the shift of this ideology-identity dialectic from positive register (witnessed in texts like *The Great Leap* Forward) to a negative one, in relation to Nepal's Maoist People's War? The answer, ironically, can be found by falling back on the very basic tenets of historical materialism.

In the same 1999 interview of Prachanda taken by Li Onesto, which was referred to in the beginning of this essay, the Chairman of CPN-Maoist says:

> The people know that we are taking this national question seriously and, from a political point of view and a national and historical point of view, this is the only solution for the oppressed nationalities. Nobody, not even *the ruling class people of oppressed nationalities*, dare to oppose

[67] Marie Lecomte-Tilouine, "Ethnic Demands within Maoism," in *Himalayan People's War: Nepal's Maoist Rebellion*, ed. Michael Hutt (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 120–21.

[68] Ibid., 121-122.

[69] Ibid., 124.

> our policy. They are f*orced* to say that this policy of the Maoists is correct. There are so many members of parliament who say, 'Yeah the policy of Maoists is correct for oppressed nationalities [emphasis mine].[70]

Thus, Chairman Prachanda explicitly acknowledges the presence of an expropriating bourgeoisie/proto-bourgeoisie class within the *janajati* groups in Nepal, who amidst the height of the People's War have been *compelled* to extend their support to the CPN-Maoist and the latter's stance on the country's indigenous nationality question; but the ideological force of the People's War started waning decisively after King Gyanendra's staging of a military coup on 1 February 2005, which toppled the parliamentary democratic framework existent in Nepal since 1990.[71]

This royal coup led the Maoists to firmly believe that an alliance between the bourgeois parliamentary parties (like the Nepali Congress and CPN-UML) and the revolutionary democrats (the Maoists themselves) was inevitable in order to 'complete' the bourgeois democratic revolution in Nepal, which was time and again hindered by the monarchical feudal-comprador class.[72] The CPN-Maoist leader Baburam Bhattarai stated in a 2002 article,

> It may be relevant here to note that the CPN (Maoist) and URPC [United Revolutionary People's Council, a mass united front allied to the CPN-Maoist] have advanced the immediate slogans of a roundtable conference of all patriotic and democratic forces, an interim government and election to a constituent assembly to complete the bourgeois democratic revolution, which is getting increasingly positive response from other democratic forces, the intelligentsia and the general masses.[73]

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[70] Prachanda, "Red Flag Flying on the Roof of the World," 198.

[71] Baburam Bhattarai, "Royal Regression and the Question of a Democratic Republic in Nepal," *Economic and Political Weekly* 40, no. 15 (April 2005): 1510, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4416464.

[72] Baburam Bhattarai, "Triangular Balance of Forces," *Economic and Political Weekly* 37, no. 46 (November 2002): 4608–9, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4412839.

[73] Ibid., 4609.

Therefore, even before the 2005 royal coup, there were voices inside the CPN-Maoist which advocated the gradual revision of the ultimate objective of the People's War; rather than working towards the creation of a socialist/communist state, people like Bhattarai sought to 'complete' the bourgeois democratic revolution (in a classic Hegelian fashion!). The revisionists in the CPN-Maoist chose to adhere to a (faulty) model of teleological Marxism. According to Bhattarai, the nine-year-long armed struggle in Nepal must culminate with signing an ideological truce with bourgeois liberal democracy, for now; the subaltern classes and oppressed nationalities of Nepal must patiently sit in the waiting-room of history until the bourgeois democratic revolution dialectically starts faltering and the it is 'right time' to start working towards a socialist state structure, or so the 'Maoist-revisionists' opined – and this strand of thought increasingly won acceptance with the Party, especially after King Gyanendra's military coup.

Although a detailed dive into the ideological and/or practical efficacy of Bhattarai's line falls beyond the scope of this essay, it can definitely be argued that the CPN-Maoist's post-coup covenant with the bourgeois parties went a long way to strengthen the reactionary ruling class within the oppressed nationalities/ *janajatis* that Prachanda had talked about in his conversation with Onesto. The Maoists' choice of the 'bourgeois democracy first' line significantly weakened the primacy of class in the minds of the *janajati* groups, which, in its turn, orchestrated a push of the ideology-identity dialectic towards a negative register. If the *janajatis* had to negotiate their everyday existence with the ruling class in a liberal, multiparty democracy and not an egalitarian socialist/communist state, was it not better to use their marginalised ethnic identity and a rights-based discourse as a bargaining chip vis-à-vis the government, rather than class?

One of the ways in which this became evident was when the Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) split in June 2012[74] following the exit of key leaders like Mohan Baidya/Kiran and Ram Bahadur Thapa/Badal, who went on to form their own Maoist party. Baidya and Thapa's chief grievance was against the 'establishment faction' in the CPN-Maoist, whose well-known representatives were Prachanda and Baburam Bhattarai.

[74] Aditya Adhikari, "Nepal: The Discontents after the Revolution," *Economic and Political Weekly* 48, no. 7 (February 2013): 27, https://www.jstor.org/stable/23391302.

> In his [Mohan Baidya] view, the game of multiparty politics would gradually corrupt the Maoists and rob them of their revolutionary edge. Long-term alliance between the Maoists and the older parliamentary parties was impossible given their irreconcilable ideologies. […] Now that the monarchy had been overthrown, the party must focus their struggle against the parliamentary parties'[75]. Following the split, when radicals like Baidya and Thapa attempted to garner support for their cause of the continuation of class struggle among the Madhesi and *janajati* groups, 'the leaders of these groups reject[ed] the notion that class should take precedence over identity claims.[76]

**From Class Politics to Identity Politics: Towards a Conclusion**

When laying down our theoretical toolbox at the very beginning of this paper, we highlighted how a politics based on Marxism/Maoism must always hold on to class as the primary identitarian marker and engage in a 'dual class struggle' to maintain class's primacy in relation to other non-class identities. We also talked about Gramsci's conception of the circularity of ideology, characterised by disintegration/ incoherence on the one end and organicity/unity on the other. Our engagement with anthropological and historical literature aptly demonstrates that although the formation of the CPN (Maoist) and its subsequent launching of a protracted people's war revived the disintegrating class question in the context of post-1990 Nepal; but its fusion of class and ethnicity to form a 'practical ideology' and strengthen the war even though a novel attempt, proved to be a failure, as with the progress of the People's War, the 'ethnic consciousness' among the *janajatis* of Nepal overpowered class and pushed it to a secondary status, thus bringing an end to the 'dual class struggle'. According to Ismail and Shah, which I must quote at length,

> Although facilitating the emergence of this [ethnic] movement was a conscious effort by the Nepali Maoists, in the absence of a wider class project around which to forge class demands, the Maoists have been unable to withstand pressures from mainstream and other

[75] Ibid.

[76] Ibid., 29.

> establishment forces that have an interest in the continued marginalisation of indigenous groups. […] As Lenin (1913) argued, the focus on autonomy takes attention away from the task of democratising the state, which is necessary to ensure peace between nationalities. Thus, the Maoists have embraced the neo-liberal line in the hope of strengthening Nepal's working class, have played into the hands of donors and the ruling elite through their own abandonment, not of the indigenous question, but of class politics. Having facilitated the emergence of a movement that places ethnic demands at the same level as class demands, they have also enabled the political landscape to be dominated by divisions over indigeneity, ethnicity and consensus-based politics, instead of deepening the emerging class polarisation as a result of the People's War.[77]

Thus, the Maoists' propagation of 'ethno-Marxism' as a 'practical ideology' can be deemed to be a critical failure in the end since the initial organicity/unity achieved during the early days of the People's War dissolved into an incoherent/disintegrated form of identity politics demanding the creation of autonomous regions exclusively modelled on ethnicity, and that too, possessing a fuzzy and illiberal vision. Moreover, Shneiderman too raises the point that 'practical ideology' alone would prove to be inadequate for building a truly egalitarian and functional polity in Nepal.[78] Last but not least,

> […] The inability of the Maoists to smash the present state and develop their own form of proletarian state power in spite of wielding de facto power means that the prospect of the Maoist project ending up as (yet) another radical nationalist project cannot be ruled out. This raises the ugly prospect of the movement degenerating into a form of economism albeit of the progressive, radical left-nationalist variety.[79]

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[77] Feyzi Ismail and Alpa Shah, "Class Struggle, the Maoists and the Indigenous Question in Nepal and India," *Economic and Political Weekly* 50, no. 35 (August 2015): 115–20, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24482315.

[78] Shneiderman, "The Formation of Political Consciousness", 305.

[79] Saroj Giri, "Social Transformation and Political Power," *Economic and Political Weekly* 41, no. 21 (27 May–2 June 2006): 2154, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4418271.

As we now know, the CPN (Maoist) took that very liberal-bourgeois path that Giri had feared. Although the People's War began in a time when traditional communist regimes throughout the globe had fallen, and neo-liberal capitalism had gripped the world, instead of being a beacon of hope, the Maoist movement of Nepal ultimately surrendered at the feet of neo-liberalism when the Maoists agreed to enter mainstream parliamentary politics, much like its communist predecessors in Nepal. The only difference was that when Prachanda was elected the prime minister in 2008, inaugurating a new left-of-capital regime, Nepal was declared a federal democratic republic.

The Prachanda path, which engendered the beginning of the People's War came to a non-revolutionary closure, with one crucial takeaway for future communists – any praxis of 'ethno-Marxism' must be viewed critically, as there will always be a tendency that the ideology-identity dialectic will assume a negative nature.

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# Being the Goddess: Fashioning a Gendered 'Self' and 'Other' through Ritualistic Praxis

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*In this essay, I will try to bring together the essential archetypes of the middle and lower-class Bengali Hindu home experience: Sondhey Dewa (offering the evening prayer) and its essential material ritual performances. It tries to understand the everyday phenomenology of the home not simply through what Dipesh Chakraborty calls 'European idea of domesticity', but through a more metaphysical, versatile colloquial religious discourse of shongshar (cosmic world and home). I will study the essential materials of the evening prayer: dhoop (incense) and dhuno (Indian Frankincense) and analyse them as the personal material embodiment of the sacred domestic and argue that its materiality and smell-ontology induces a religious experience attached with the idea of mongol (temporal-wellbeing) while negotiating with the omongol (inauspicious). Furthermore, the goddess Lakshmi, pronounced as Lokkhi in Bengali, the embodiment of wellbeing, and her counterpart o-lokkhi, the embodiment of inauspiciousness (if not treated well), the contradictory imaginings are shown to be engraved in the ontology of smell. Bringing the imaginings of the goddess and the ontology of smell, I would argue that shongshar is an everyday religious dwelling. I would also contest the Western idea of 'gaze' being an unequalled form of sensory faculty over the others. In a Hindu Bengali home, an inward-looking domain from the outside world, all our sensory faculties are equally essential and requisite to experience the everyday religion of the Bengali home, particularly as experienced by women, who essentially embrace both aspects of the goddess Lokkhi. Through the reading and analysis of the ritual text of Lokkhi'r Panchali (worship-tales for goddess Lokkhi), fieldwork among the twenty-two women householders of middle and lower classes, I try to bring a new understanding of the metaphysics of smell, virtuous ritual understanding of goddess worship-devotion and the agency of women in a Bengali home's experience.*

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**Keywords**: Bengali-Hindu-home, *Mongol,* Lokkhi, Temporality, Time and Space.

## Introduction

> *Shongshar kora oto sohoj noye. Dhoirjo ebong buddhi nah thakley shongshar e thaktey parbey nah!*[1]

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**Notes on Translation and Transliteration:** In this essay, I have used vernacular spellings that reflect local pronunciation, such as *shongshar*, Lokkhi (Goddess Lakshmi), *pujo* (worship), *mongol* (wellbeing), and *Sondhey Dewa* (offering the evening prayer). The vernacular spellings

> It is not an easy task to do *shongshar*. Without patience and intellect, you can't reside within a *shongshar*.

Rupkotha, a 77-year-old woman, exclaimed with a smirk, her confidence evident as I enquired about her experience with the *shongshar.*

*Shongshar* is an esoteric phase as it refers to not only the universal metaphysical life-cycle but also one's immediate domestic actuality. It is not just conceptual but essentially performative, and must be managed through understanding and enactment. "So the most obvious use of the Bengali term is *shongsar kora* (doing). In this, the *shongshari* person, literally, the householder, controls a slice of abstract time and space, upon which she/he works and realises the experience of *shongshar.*"[2] A slice of abstract time and space can be understood as home. It is the same spatial parallel to the material every day. The everyday spatial home is not outside the cosmic world but is rather manifested within it, and it also embodies freedom. The term *shongshar,* therefore, transcends the boundaries and binaries of the inside-outside, agency, past-present-future.

This essay is based on ethnographic research among twenty-two Bengali Hindu women from different social backgrounds. Among twenty-two of my interviewees, nine of them were working beyond their homes and thirteen of them were homemakers. Nine of them belonged to the general category of caste reservation, eight of them were from the Scheduled Castes (SC) category, and five of them belonged to the Other Backward Castes (OBC) category. All my interviewees belonged to the middle-class and lower middle-class homes in terms of their financial background. The interviews conducted were semi-structured in nature. My questions were focused on how they perceive the *shongshar*, followed by if they do venerate goddess Lokkhi within their homes and if yes, how. The *Panchalis* that were used by my interviewees in their

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have been italicised, except for the names of deities. I have mentioned only those interviewees who explicitly consented to the use of their names and stories. I have also used brackets alongside vernacular words to explain their meanings in English as accurately as possible. Furthermore, I have quoted verbatim the words of some of my interviewees in the language in which they spoke; in the case of vernacular expressions, I have provided their meanings in English.

[1] Rupkotha, age 77, interviewed by the author, 29 August 2022, Kolkata.

[2] Sukanya Sarbadhikary, "Shankh-er Shongshar: Afterlife Everyday," *Religions* 10, no. 53 (2019): 1, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10010053.

homes were written by various authors and did not indicate a particular year of publication in almost all cases. Hence, I have used the common Panchali that I found among four households, *Sri Sri Lokkhi Devir Panchali O Brotokotha* written by Baikuntha Nath Majhi, compiled by Sri Mintu Chakraborty, and published by Saraswati Library.

This essay brings together the sacred material archetype of a Bengali Hindu home to reimagine the concept of *shongshar* within the fold of women's agency and locate the continuity of its cultural undertones. I will study the contradictory imaginings of goddess Lokkhi through the text '*Lokkhir Panchali*' and the ontology of smell of the essential material embodiments of the ritual of *Sondhey Dewa*; *dhoop* (incense) and *dhuno* (frankincense). I will argue that both the imaginings of goddess Lokkhi are embodied in the women of the household, and the aroma-inducing smoke of the *dhoop* and *dhuno*.

While several other gods and goddesses are venerated in the Hindu Bengali household, I specifically desire to study the imaginings and stereotypes of goddess Lokkhi. As in this essay, I want to primarily focus on the feminine approach or modality of devotional aesthetics and how, in popular Bengali imaginations, goddesses embody distinct notions of myths and lore, and are severely influential in unveiling the nuances of the aesthetics. Goddess Lokkhi, in many ways, is more imminent to the *shongshar.* She is esteemed as more proximate than her consort Narayana, her father Mahadev, her brothers Ganesh and Karthik, her sister Saraswati and her fierce mother Durga. Due to the imagination of Lokkhi being located at the *shongsha*r *er-gorbho* (womb of the domestic), diurnal, weekly, monthly and annual ritual offerings and prayers are exclusive to her worship.

Thus, in this essay, I primarily explore the notions of the larger life and death and the cosmic world woven into the imagination of the goddess, and how in every household, women are regarded as embodiments of the goddess. The ritual of offering the evening prayer by the women of the household to the goddess Lokkhi, while spreading the aromatic smoke of incense and frankincense, establishes a greater sense of well-being, prosperity, and peace. The analysis is based on a critical reading of *Lokkhir Panchali,* ethnographic data collected from the women, and a sensory inquiry into the evening prayer.

## *Sondhey Dewa* and the mortal embodiment of Goddess Lokkhi

In a Bengali Hindu household, regardless of class and caste background, the ritual offering of the evening prayer, or *Sondhey Dewa,* is ubiquitous. This tradition of offering the evening prayer and performing its essential material rituals comes together at the onset of dusk. The liminal time of the everyday, when the light of the day slips into the dark of the night, paving the way for the inauspiciousness to slip in. At this liminal time every day, women of the household attempt at making palpable the liminal period of dusk to perform the evening rites. These ritual rites and their performance also signify the responsibility of these women to summon well-being and negotiate with the inauspicious.

Having been born into a Bengali household and having experienced the ritual of *Sondhey Dewa* throughout my life and through prolonged conversations with my interviewees, the preparation and performance of *Sondhey Dewa* are substantially concordant in every household. Women of the household clean their homes; cleaning means tidying up the household. Manisha, a homemaker in a traditional joint family in North Calcutta, emphasised the prohibition of dusting the home in the evening.

> *Sondhey bela ghor kokhono jhaat ditey nei. Amar maa didima sasuri maa shobai eki kotha sikhiyechey. Maa lokkhi sob jaygay achey. Ratre bela take kokkhono ghor chara kortey nei.*[3]
>
> You should never dust your home in the evening. My mother, grandmother, and mother-in-law, amongst others, taught me this. The mother Lokkhi presides over every object in the household. It is inauspicious to throw her out in the dark.

Hence, the women wake everyone up at dusk to avoid any bad luck or inauspicious events. They then take a shower, almost irrespective of the season, change their apparel, tie their hair neatly, water their Tulsi (Holy Basil) plant and place a lamp at its base.[4] They then perform a brief *puja* in the *thakur ghor* (literally the God's room; a small sanctum of God within every home) and

[3] Manisha, age 58, interviewed by the author, 7 September 2022, Kolkata.

[4] Rupkotha, interview by the author, 29 August 2022.

burn the *dhoop* and *dhuno* and carry it throughout the entire home, spreading its smoke, infused with aroma and blow on the *shankh* (conch).[5]

Notwithstanding their diverse backgrounds, lifestyles, and worldviews, their notion of home was peculiarly coherent. They all agreed that this ritual performance of *Sondhey Dewa* is an unuttered summons for Goddess Lokkhi during the liminal period of the day. Lokkhi is the goddess of well-being, auspiciousness, peace and life in a broad sense.[6] The ritual offering of *Sondhey Dewa* is, in a way, requesting the goddess to be seated in the household, protecting it from the impending dark. Women also, without fail, place a lamp and incense at the base of their Tulsi plant.[7] In Hindu traditions, the Tulsi plant is considered to be an earthly manifestation of the goddess Lokkhi and thus the other consort of Narayana. While Narayana is the preserver within the Hindu triad of *Trimurti* (the holy trinity of the supreme divinity in Hinduism; the cosmic corollary of creation, preservation and destruction are personified in the form of Brahma, Narayana and Shiva), Lokkhi and her other forms are considered his egalitarian and compatible partners.

Tulsi is considered the inception between the divine and Earth.[8] The plant is typically placed in the house or on balconies in urban settings. Women of the household are solely responsible for looking after the plant as it is believed that a spiritual excellence and the divine grace of Narayana is granted through the worship of Tulsi. Among Bengali Hindu beliefs, catering to the Tulsi plant also brings the women the love and grace of their husbands, who are embodiments of Narayana in the *shongshar.* The plant is always kept outside the walls of the home, but not beyond its boundaries.[9] While Lokkhi is requested to be seated within the confines of the household, rescuing it from the dark, Tulsi is expected to keep the boundaries of the home lit to chase away the dark. The time of her worship, dusk, remains explicative and symbolic of her locale and imaginings within the household. It is also the time for everyone to return home and put all work to rest. In Bengali predisposition, women's

[5] Sarbadhikary, "*Shankh-er-Shongshar,"* 2.

[6] Flibbertigibbet, "The Goddess and the Owl," *Economic and Political Weekly* 1 no. 12 (November 1966): 484-85, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4357169

[7] Sarbadhikary, "*Shankh-er-Shongshar" 7*.

[8] Frederick J. Simoons, *Plants of Life, Plants of Death* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 14-16.

[9] Ibid., 17-18.

long hair is their ornamentation, but is also unconfined and embodies lust. Thus, women comb their hair neatly and tie a *khopa* (bun) before the evening prayer.[10] Women tied to the materiality of the cosmic world and home/ *shongshar*, having to cater to its well-being and negotiate with the inauspicious, fits the Lokkhi and Tulsi archetype and further problematise the questions of femininity, home and the nation.

While conducting my research among the women performing the ritual of offering the evening prayer, it could be understood that the essential performance of the *Sondhey Dewa* collectively holds deeper significance. My respondents emphasised on the importance of the coming together of all our sensory faculties to not only experience but deeply understand the peace. The Bengali everyday religious experience that includes the goddess of purity, dusk, home and the world is a lot more intertwined than we perceive. Kahini, a 50-year-old government school teacher in North 24 Parganas, explained how, according to her, this ritual offering is her major contribution to her household. She said:

> *Aajkal toh shobbai kaaj kore. Ami 24 bochor boyes e porate shuru kori. Tao Kolkata holey kotha chilo kintu tokhon toh egulo oj-para-ga. Amar sosur baari khub adhunik taayi konodin somossa hoyni. Kintu baarir bou hisebe eta amar kortobbo. Barir mongol ami chara ke chaibey. Taayi tuition korar somaye sondhey lagley tuk kore sondhey ta diye di*.[11]
>
> Nowadays, everyone is working. I started teaching when I was 24. More so, I live in the suburbs; it would have been different if it were Calcutta. But my in-laws were very progressive, and hence it was never a problem. But as the woman of the household, it is my responsibility to summon well-being in my home. Who else would do this if not me? I also provide private tuition, and at dusk, I quickly perform the offering.

My ethnographic experience also pointed out an imperative entangling meta-theme of fertility. Red is the colour of fertility and fertile abundance. Married women who are symbols of fertility, wear sarees with red borders, *alta* on their

[10] Sarbadhikary, "*Shankh-er-Shongshar,"* 7.

[11] Kahini, age 50, interviewed by the author, 23 July 2022, North 24 Parganas.

feet (red paint), *sindoor* (vermillion), *shankha/pola/loha* (white/red/iron bangles) and several gold ornaments if it's affordable. The white bangle *shankha* is made up of conch shell and is symbolic of prolific purity, iron is symbolic of marital life and prosperity, and gold symbolises wealth. A woman adorned with such ornaments is "literally called *Lokkhi*, an everyday mortal embodiment of Vishnu's consort."[12] Thus, the celestial pair, Lokkhi-Narayan, symbolising *shangsharic* (worldly) conservation, is where the divine meets the temporal in the home, in Lokkhi's fertile iconography. In every *thakurghor* (God's room) exists a *mongol-ghot* (auspicious pot) full of water, which represents the ampleness of the *shongshar*, plentiful grains in the kitchen and a generous homemaker, marking the presence of the divine Lokkhi in a mundane household.[13] Alpana, a 37-year-old homemaker, remarked while emphasising the importance and necessity of these symbols,

> *Aajkal onekei sankha pola sindur porena. Kintu tatey amar money hoyna je kono somossa achey. Money lokkhi thaklei hoye.*[14]
>
> Women nowadays don't adhere to wearing these symbols. I don't think it is a problem. The embodiment of the goddess within oneself is more important.

### Lokkhi and *O-Lokkhi* in Security and Vulnerability of *Shongshar*

Goddess Lakshmi is one of the most popular and widely worshipped goddesses in all of India. Her shrines are found in every Hindu household/shop, or business run by Hindu owners, almost irrespective of the class and caste backgrounds.[15] Similarly, in Bengal, she is worshipped as widely as in the rest of the country, but in a slightly different image and in a more personal/mortal embodied form. She is called Lokkhi instead of Lakhsmi, a more intimate and informal way of addressing her as a mortal part of the household. The women or girls of the household who embody her characteristics are literally called *lokkhi meye/bou* (girl/wife) and are responsible

[12] Sarbadhikary, "*Shankh-er-Shongshar,*" 4.

[13] Sarbadhikary, "*Shankh-er-Shongshar,*" 4-5.

[14] Alpana, age 37, interviewed by the author, 12 July 2022, Kolkata.

[15] Constatina Rhodes, *Invoking Lakshmi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 4.

for *shongshar's mongol*; wellbeing, peace, prosperity.[16] Within the household premises, the material worship of the goddess is also directly related and paralleled to the treatment of the women of the household. In popular Bengali belief, if *ghor-er-lokkhi* (woman of the household) is not treated with respect and dignity, the goddess Lokkhi refuses to live in the household as well.

Drawing from this context, the idea of *o-lokkhi* (devoid of Lokkhi) is an extremely significant charter to the idea of the goddess. Women who don't embody the overarching qualities of the goddess are called *o-lokkhi*. In many popular beliefs in Bengal, *o-lokkhi* isn't a separate entity but rather a counterpart of Lokkhi herself. '*Shongshar-e o-lokkhi bhor koreche*' (*o-lokkhi* has possessed the household) is a common term used in a situation of crisis. It essentially entails that Lokkhi has left the *Shongshar*'s charge to *o-lokkhi*, mostly as a lesson/punishment. *O-lokkhi* is therefore devoid of Lokkhi and thus will be devoid of wealth, peace and prosperity too. Hence, women's ethical boundaries and everyday conduct determine a prosperous domestic/cosmic future.[17]

Apart from the everyday ritual of *Sondhey Dewa* and the summoning of Lokkhi within the domestic, every Thursday, which is literally called the *lokkhi-bar* (Lokkhi's day), an elaborate ritual offering is arranged in her honour. In Bengal, Thursdays are considered auspicious to worship the goddess of wellbeing. Elaborate meals are offered to the goddess in the afternoon and in the evening, her *panchali* is read. *Panchalis* are essential to the understanding of Lokkhi's domesticity. *Panchalis* constitute "pre-British folk literature",[18] delineating the goddess's qualities, chants, and potency of worship.[19] Lokkhi*'s panchali* can be broken down into twelve separate verses to worship her every month of the year. These are devotional manuals found in every Bengali home, where the householder and the married woman of the home read them on every Thursday and on *purnima* (full moon evenings).

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[16] Lina M. Fruzzetti, *The Gift of a Virgin* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), 123.

[17] Sarbadhikary, "*Shankh-er Shongshar,*" 8.

[18] Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Difference," *History Workshop Journal* no. 36 (Autumn, 1993): 8, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4289250

[19] Constantina Rhodes, *Invoking Lakshmi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 8.

The *panchali brotokotha* (worship-tales) read on Thursdays are an extremely desperate appeal to escape the goddess's abandonment. She is requested to be *ochola* (to indefinitely be seated within the altar of the home), not be *nirdoya* (heartless) or *chonchol* (restless).[20] Her worshippers, in turn, promise to follow her footsteps and linger within her shadow. She is not only invited within the altar of the home but also into its other metaphorical domains like the *thakurghor*, kitchen and especially into *dhan* (rice grain) and most importantly within the physical and spiritual body of her worshipper. Lokkhi's boon of wellbeing is thus obtained and ensured through these homely, inward-looking narratives with the inner vulnerability of the home.

Therefore, the *panchali* narrates tales about prude men losing their trade due to their ignorance and arrogance and only regaining their wealth after worshipping the goddess. It promotes the idea that one cannot be ignorant towards the goddess and has to excessively cater to her with love, care and dignity to escape the fear of her abandonment. The same idea is also harboured towards the women of the household. This 'catering' primarily describes and reinstates the religious experience of the *shongshar,* and the women are further influenced not to abandon their *shongshar* and perform their duties lifelong like a *lokkhi meye* (girl). Manisha, who is a rigorous homemaker and embodies all the *lokkhi-shri* (demeanour of the goddess), was disheartened to find out the presence of another woman in her husband's life. She thus left the household, requesting the goddess to take care of the household in her absence. She replaced herself with the literal goddess. She said,

> *Ami maa ke bollam je ami jodi shotti kare tomar meye hoye thaki, nisthapurno bou hoye thaki, amar shongshar amaye phiriye dio*.[21]
>
> I told the mother goddess that if I am truly your daughter, if I have been a devoted wife, please return my home to me.

Her husband eventually returned to her and urged her to return home to their *shongshar*. Drawing from the experience of the women and the *panchali* stories, the women are the mortal embodiments of the goddess at home, in our everyday lives, the goddess replaces her to save her dignity if she has any.

[20] Sarbadhikary, "*Shankh-er Shongshar,*" 11.

[21] Manisha, interview by the author, 7 September 2022.

"Although Lakshmi is the goddess of prosperity, what is really intended in her persona is 'grace' and 'ritual certainty.'"[22]

Brototi, another interviewee who is a working woman, said, "We, the women of the household, might do a lot of things that might be wrong and selfish to the plain eye, but we look for the greater good of our home."[23] In one of the *panchali* stories, when Lokkhi assures a woman that she will take care of her household while she's away, she requests the goddess to be seated within her home until her return. She goes ahead and commits suicide, confining the goddess within her household forever.[24] Thus, the ethics of the domestic universe is quite interesting, where women control not only the slice of time transcending the cosmic and domestic universe but also the truth and lies of it, the right and wrongs of it and goddess Lokkhi is believed to be standing with them.

Stories from the *Panchali Brotokotha* also take a hyper focus on the fear of loss of fertility of women. Here, fertility also symbolises abundance of fertile land (which signifies wealth and prosperity) along with the literal fertile womb. Tales from this *Panchali* narrate how Lokkhi alleviates poverty and friction in the lives of her devotees, the foundation of dissatisfaction and unhappiness and graces them with good marriage, wealth, and sons. During marriage, the woman in particular "becomes a deity,"[25] and harbours the same qualities. The fertile womb of the woman bestowed by Lokkhi also ensures the birth of a son, who, in turn, brings fertility to the land. "Similarly, mothers and sons are blessed through peasantry, and the importance of bountiful grains is evident repeatedly, for instance, in the autumnal ritual of *khetro-broto* (field-rituals), and there are even narrative instances of grains transforming to gold."[26] Through her blessing, the narrative of gender roles of Bengali households was redefined and reaffirmed.

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[22] Flibbertigibbet, "The Goddess and the Owl," *Economic and Political Weekly* 1 no.12 (November 1966): 484-85, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4357169.

[23] Brototi, age 39, interviewed by the author, 11 January 2023, Kolkata.

[24] Baikuntha Nath Majhi *Sri Sri Lokkhi Devir Panchali O Brotokotha* (Kolkata: Saraswati Library, n.d.), 12.

[25] William Harman, "The Hindu Marriage as Soteriological Event," *International Journal of Sociology of the Family* 17, no.2 (Autumn 1987): 171, https://www.jstor.org/stable/23028457.

[26] Sarbadhikary, "*Shankh-er Shongshar*," 15.

The mystique *shongshar* is also an extremely vulnerable place, as described by one of my interviewees, Swapna. She is a school teacher, and she disclosed her experience of anxiousness about forgetting her home. While she is at work, she is explicitly worried about her household, even though her housekeeper is both experienced and efficient. Upon enquiring, she mentioned that being present in the space without actually doing any physical work keeps her at ease.[27] Ratna, a vegetable seller, exclusively mentioned her fear of not being at home by dusk.

> *Mon ta khoch khoch kore jodi train deri kore. Sondhey dewa ta ekta obbhesh amar*.[28]
>
> I feel restless when there's a train delay. Offering the evening prayer is my habit.

Among all my interviewees who were working outside of their homes, the anxiety of forgetting their homes was pertinent. In recent times, there is also another very important and conforming narrative of the modern Lokkhi, who has quite adjusted to the changes that came with time. Sumita, who is from a lower socio-economic background and is a woman of caste identity, earns her livelihood for herself and her sick husband by working as the house help in four consecutive houses. She told me,

> *Sudhu sona porley lokkhi hoye nah go didimoni, ami amar swami-r chikitsha-r jonney bairey kaaj kortey esechi, amio lokkhi, amar boshti teo ghorey ghorey lokkhi achey*.[29]
>
> Only wearing gold jewellery doesn't make you Lokkhi. I have stepped outside my home to support my husband's treatment. I am Lokkhi. In my slum, there are Lokkhi(s) in every household.

Her narrative transcends the goddess from being an exclusive upper-caste Hindu deity to a more popular embodiment of strength, resilience and auspiciousness within every household irrespective of their caste and class.

[27] Swapna, age 61, interviewed by the author, 18 January 2023, Kolkata.
[28] Ratna, age 46, interviewed by the author, 12 February 2023, Kolkata.
[29] Sumita, age 46, interviewed by the author, 1 December 2022, Kolkata.

Ronja, a baker by profession, defined the idea of being Lokkhi as the ability to focus. She, who has limited time to relinquish domestic responsibilities and *pujo*, says that she tries to devote her full attention while performing the *pujo*. She doesn't think that spending hours doing rituals brings well-being. It is rather the coming together of the mind and heart in attention that brings well-being.[30] The vulnerability of *shongshar* is also the general feeling of women forgetting their home, and rendering the essential risk of becoming *o-lokkhi*. Thus, women who work outside their homes and those who don't go through the struggle of balancing the home and the world together, which in a way is a constant obsession and desire to remain as the embodiment of Lokkhi and the consistent disquiet of domestic vulnerability.

## *Dhoop-Dhuno*: The mystic smoke of wellbeing

Modernity claims that it is the age of vision. Erlmann conceptualised that colonial and post-colonial knowledge hierarchies are hinged on the gaze, and it has also aided the Western monopoly over knowledge since the advent of the Enlightenment, which, consequently, generated more and more texts and images in all disciplines, including anthropology. As a result of the West's championing of visuals as the sense of the modern and the rational, other senses like smell, hearing and touch have been relegated to an inferior position in Western literature.[31] Enlightenment scholarships rendered olfactory and tactile perceptions subordinate to the senses of vision. The aromatic smell becomes antithetical to the sophisticated, modern sense of sight, the latter thought to be possessing more rational qualities, like the ability to represent the object of scrutiny from memory, while the other senses remain visceral, equable almost to animalistic instincts.[32] But despite the modern obsession, smell remains metonymic and metaphorical, serving as evidence to the actuality of their origin and also as an inkling of a broader essential point of the origin. It plays an essential role in our social interactions, i.e., eating, drinking, health, domestic life, religion, class and ethnic relations.[33] The

[30] Ronja, age 34, interviewed by the author, 12 February 2023, Kolkata.

[31] Veit Earlmann, "But What of the Ethnographic Ear?" in *Hearing Cultures* edited by Veit Erlmann, (Berg Publishers, 2004), 1-21.

[32] Sukanya Sarbadhikary, "The Leftover Untouch" in *Religion and the City in India*, ed. Supriya Chaudhari (Routledge, 2022), 133.

[33] Anthony Synnott, *The Body Social* (London: Routledge, 1993), 21.

question of the meanings that smell constructs, whether they're universal or culturally exclusive, remains scarcely explored.

Similarly, in a Bengali-Hindu home, the smell from the smoke of *dhoop* and *dhuno* is integral to the religious experience. It's the closest an objective reality can form into a concept without abandoning the sensible palatinate altogether.[34] Incense and frankincense are composed of resins and gums which, when burnt, emit a smoke which has a distinguishable fragrance. When they're looked at from an etic interpretation, it manifests as a symbolic marker of passage between the temporal and the spiritual. Its ingredients essentially embody incorruptibility and immortality and effuse the aroma and a distinct sense of parallel between the ordinary and extraordinary, the home and the world.[35]

All my interviewees, and very interestingly, the women who believed in Lokkhi and those who didn't, the upper-caste and the lower-caste, the rich and the poor, unanimously agreed upon the 'peace' that generates from the smoke. Every day at dusk, the women of the household burn multiple *dhoops* at different places of the home and its periphery, at both the *thakurghor* and at the base of the Tulsi plant. *Dhuno* is placed in the *dhunuchi* (funnel-shaped open incense burner), and the pot is stuffed with coconut coir and burned. They then take the *dhunuchi*, emitting the smoke, all throughout the home and place it in the kitchen and the *thakurghor* alternatively, further spreading the *mongol*-ness.

Brototi, during her interview, emphasised the importance of the ability to concentrate. As she works outside her home as a drawing teacher, she sometimes is constrained by time, and it's important for her to perform the evening prayer with her maximum concentration.[36] The smell of the *dhoop* and *dhuno* helps her do so. The *panchali* stories, apart from dictating ways towards the well-being of the *shongshar*, also focus on the importance of using and understanding the all-encompassing nature of all our sensory faculties. In a

[34] Alfred Gell, "Magic, perfume, dream …" in *Symbols and Sentiments*, ed. I.M. Lewis (London: Academic Press, 1977), 29.

[35] Margaret E.Kenna, "Why Does Incense Smell Religious?," *Journal of Mediterranean Studies* 15, no.1 (2005):1.

[36] Brototi, interview by the author, 11 January 2023.

Bengali-Hindu home experience, and as stated by most of my interviewees, we need to feel and understand all our senses. As Lokkhi is believed to be a restless goddess, she is antipathetic towards the sound of *kashor-ghonta* (bells used in Hindu worship) but is fond of the calm and still and oceanic sound of the conch, which defines and symbolises eternal wellbeing.[37] Similarly, she is also believed to thrive and rest well in an atmosphere of *dhoop* and *dhuno-induced* smoke. In the moment, it brings the women of the house a perfect atmosphere to pray for the well-being of their *shongshar* and to transcend from the ordinary to the extraordinary, from mortal to immortal, to embody the goddess.

Sumita, who lives in a slum with her ailing husband, told me that she, without fail, burns *dhoop* and *dhuno* every day to counter the aura of the sickness that prevails in their home, which, in a way, she thinks is *o-lokkhi's* influence in their lives. She also performs a brief *pujo* during the new moon before *Kali Pujo* to get rid of *o-lokkhi* or to turn *o-lokkhi* into Lokkhi.[38] It is widely believed that *o-lokkhi* is an unsatisfied and agitated counterpart of Lokkhi. The aroma of the smoke tends to calm her down. The goddess is then believed to return to her true Lokkhi-like nature and let go of her destructive side. Thus, the Lokkhi and *o-lokkhi pujos* together render the broad stretch of a *shongshar*'s religious experience. While *Mongol* is summoned home, disorders and disparities are ritually abandoned.

## Conclusion

My extensive interaction with Bengali Hindu women from different backgrounds led me to understand that the *panchali* as a theme is retained as sacred in their religious as well as everyday experience of the *shongshar*. The stories serve as the direction for the women to make sense of their lives and ethics, and most importantly, develop a desire to attain wellbeing for their household within the fold of their agency. So, the Bengali-Hindu home space is inclusive of contradictory imaginings of auspicious home-making. The altar of the home is in itself a paradoxical and complex space. These ethical and embodied experiences shed light on the primary imagination of the home situated within the idea of constructing and harbouring several aspects of

[37] Sarbadhikary, "*Shankh-er Shongshar*," 12.

[38] Sumita, interview by the author, 1 December 2022.

Lokkhi, and *Mongol*, and negotiating with the inauspicious, which is further embodied in the smoke of *dhoop* and *dhuno*. Thus, within the depths of the spatial home and the temporal remains, the idea of *shongshar* functions.

The everyday *shangsharic* religious experience, as defined by my respondents, further nuanced my understanding of the Bengali Hindu home as a thread of intricate and perceptive apprehension between security and vulnerability. The imagination of the dual purpose of peace and destruction is embedded in the goddess. While she brings domestic peace, she also threatens the home of vulnerability. The smoke-induced space between the home and world, the auspicious and inauspicious, peace and fear, love and hate, fortune and disaster, marks the very duality of the *shongshar*.

Drawing from the spatial and temporal everyday home as experienced by women, I argue that to understand the Bengali-Hindu-home religious experience, we have to let go of the rigid secularistic historical imaginings of the post-colonial literature. Scholars like Kumkum Chatterjee[39] and Sukanya Sarbadhikary[40] used the Mangalkavya, Manasa Mangal and the Lokkhir panchali to establish the pre-modern cultures as substantial or tangible essentials in the sense of History. So, the untwisted temporality is protracted to the pre-colonial. Postcolonial scholars like Partha Chatterjee[41] and Mary Hancock[42] theorise the domestic sphere of the Bengali household as a vision for future nation building away from the modern public sphere. Hancock especially analyses the boundaries between the two spheres as more fluid and interactive, but also emphasises the Victorian norms to solidify these categories. The critique of the same by scholars like Kumkum Chatterjee[43] or

[39] Kumkum Chatterjee. "The Persianisation of *Itihasa*," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 67, no. 2 (May 2008): 513-43, doi: 10.1017/S0021911808000685.

[40] Sukanya Sarbadhikary, "*Shankh-er Shongshar*: Afterlife Everyday," *Religions* 10, no.53 (January 2019): 1-19. doi:10.3390/rel10010053.

[41] Partha Chatterjee, "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question," in *Recasting Women* ed. Sudesh Vaid and Kumkum Sangari (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990) 233-53.

[42] Mary Hancock, "Home Science and the Nationalisation of Domesticity in Colonial India," *Modern Asian Studies* 35, no.4 (October 2001): 871-903, https://www.jstor.org/stable/313194.

[43] Kumkum Chatterjee. "The Persianisation of *Itihasa*," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 67, no. 2 (May 2008): 513-43, doi: 10.1017/S0021911808000685.

Tanika Sarkar[44] also remains grounded within linear secular historical time. The precolonial influence on the domestic is often invisible. From my findings and drawing from Sukanya Sarbadhikary's argument of a transcendental understanding of the home and the world, I would like to argue that within the fold of the *shongshar,* class and caste as categories cease to exist. The outside performance of the social, political and economic structures of caste and class doesn't penetrate into the *shongshar's* mystical domain.

The domestic experience, essentially understood through the passage of the smoke-induced religious experience and the worship tales of the goddess, furnishes its individual sense of the sacred and time, which at its essence transcends the pre-/post-colonial universe. Every day, in essence, is a substantial category, and it goes beyond historical knowledge. The home is regenerative in nature and has its own folds, and they further address mystic inward aspects of time and space in the paradigm of *shongshar*, where the goddess of wellbeing, the auspicious smoke, the women of the household, mortal embodiments, try to understand the larger folds of life. As the home performs on these mystic folds, it twines inward towards wellbeing and untwines outward with *o-lokkhi* with the passage of smoke. These contradictions comprise *shongshar* and thus the worship tales of the journey from fortune to disaster and, inversely, form an everyday reality.

Thus, in this essay, I have tried to situate the Bengali-Hindu home as a milieu of contrary and all-encompassing religious experiences and ethics through worship of both the good and bad, Lokkhi and *o-lokkhi*. To understand the aforementioned situation and the conflicting imagining of the religious domestic experience, I have tried to first point out the problematic of visiting the home as secular and protecting the inner domain from the outside world, and finally, I have tried to visualise the women of the household with agency and the material objects of worship to both embody contradictory religious peace and fear.

[44] Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001).

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# Female Infanticide in Colonial Discourse: Reading John Cave Browne's Text

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*The British colonial authorities reported having 'discovered' the practice of female infanticide among certain high-caste Hindus in Northern India, especially among the Rajputs, Jarejahs, Khatris, and Bedis. Colonial officials explained this practice by pointing to complex factors such as caste pride, poverty, marriage customs driven by social hierarchies, and the financial strain of weddings. Through John Cave Browne's text, this article explores how colonial authorities produced knowledge about female infanticide and portrayed this issue within their broader imperial narrative. It highlights how gender-based reform became central to justifying colonial intervention, and suggests possible reasons for selective attention paid to specific castes. Additionally, it shows how anti-infanticide policies served not just as moral actions but also as tools for intrusion into the private sphere, helping to solidify colonial control. The discussion further suggests that these interventions shaped social change, affecting caste dynamics and traditional marriage practices.*

**Keywords**: Female Infanticide, Pride and poverty, Private sphere, Colonial discourse, Surveillance, Civilising mission

## Introduction

The colonial state is recognised for generating a large volume of written records. These archives are crucial for understanding modern Indian history, although scholars have critiqued their epistemological foundations. Ann Laura Stoler recommends reading the archive against the grain; however, initially reading it along the grain helps to understand the colonial state's logic, anxieties, and patterns.[1] Bernard Cohn, in his book *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*, shows the link between knowledge production and government. In this article, an attempt is made to read one colonial text to understand its dynamics properly.

[1] Ann Laura Stoler, "Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance: On the Content in the Form," *Archival Science* 2, no. 1–2 (2002): 91.

John Cave Browne's work, *Indian Infanticide: Its Origin, Progress and Suppression*, was published in 1857. The text provides a detailed summary of the topic, particularly focusing on the initiatives taken by the colonial government to suppress the crime and on the interpretation of the causes of female infanticide. Extensive official documentation was generated during efforts to prevent female infanticide, including birth registers, infant mortality records, official reports, memoranda, and correspondence. The text under discussion largely draws on these documents up to 1854. Hence, text also helps to understand how colonial officials constructed the issue of female infanticide, providing a moral justification for colonial rule. It projects Indian society as backward, barbaric and deviant that needs upliftment through colonial intervention. The use of the terms and the language, also emphasised in the article on various occasions, substantially demonstrates these notions. This article aims to explore how this text can be utilised in socio-historical writing and its significance.

In 1789, Jonathan Duncan is credited with 'discovering' the practice of female infanticide in Benares. Subsequently, this practice was found to prevail among certain castes in Kathiawar, the North-Western Province, Punjab and other regions. Initially, provincial-level interventions were used to address the issue, employing a trial-and-error approach that ranged from personal influence to rigorous surveillance. This effort culminated in the Female Infanticide Prevention Act of 1870, which specifically targeted certain regions and castes in Northern India. However, census data revealed significant sex ratio disparities even after the legislative implementation and its repeal; the authorities largely regarded the issue as a persistent moral failing rather than addressing its root causes, and it still prevails in the form of foeticide.

## Indian Infanticide: Its Origin, Progress and Suppression

John Cave Browne was an Assistant Chaplain in the Bengal establishment. He provides extensive detail on the topic, ranging from the causes and methods of infanticide to chapter-wise regional initiatives taken to suppress it. This analysis serves as a significant primary descriptive and qualitative resource, offering insights into how British officials and those in missionary roles perceived female infanticide and their narrow approach to curbing it. Many of the primary sources he used might no longer be available or accessible. For

instance, he obtained access to private documents from officials involved, including W. Muir, the secretary of the government of the North-Western Province, as well as unpublished reports from district officers in Punjab.[2] This document stands out as the source that comprehensively covers initiatives taken across all provinces in a single compilation. However, it is crucial to note that the intended audience was primarily English readers. Preconceived notions about Indian society are evident in the work, and the author's religious identity significantly impacts his argument. Thus, this information requires careful scrutiny before acceptance. This article offers a comprehensive analysis that not only summarises the primary text but also contextualises it within broader critical scholarly debates on the theme.

Female infanticide was deeply rooted in private spaces, making it difficult to capture firsthand. The methods of infanticide described in detail included poisoning with dhatura or poppy juice, burying the child alive, drowning in milk, or strangling with the umbilical cord. Yet he presents a highly dramatised scene of a girl's birth, in which the father, without any trace of guilt, makes a silent gesture and leaves, dismissing it as a matter for the women to handle.[3] He mentions strategies of escape, noting that despite surveillance, many times the family sent the pregnant woman to the neighbouring independent rajah's territory, and if a boy was born, it was announced, and if a girl, it was killed.[4] The author further points out the challenge of recognising infanticide; it exists, but holding someone responsible is very difficult. In Western India, among the Jarejahs, only one person was punished in the past 25 years.[5]

In the introduction of the text, the author focused on the causes and worldwide prevalence of infanticide with moral inclination. "Among the civilised and refined as well as the rude and barbarous, it has been found to exist…. Among the Hindoos we find other motives, peculiar to themselves, closely and deeply interwoven with their social, or so-called religious system."[6] The author

[2] John Cave Browne, *Indian Infanticide: Its Origin, Progress, and Suppression* (London: W.H. Allen & Co., 1857), ix-xi.

[3] Ibid., 5-6.

[4] Ibid., 25.

[5] Ibid., 23.

[6] Ibid., 2-3.

adopts a highly derogatory tone and exaggerated sentence structure that distorts reality and presents a generalised viewpoint. It frames Indian society in a way that reinforces the same narratives the British applied to American and African cultures, portraying colonised people as inherently barbaric. The language appears designed to evoke moral guilt in the reader toward those practising the custom, while simultaneously glorifying British rulers as relentless authorities striving to suppress this so-called savagery. As Bernard Cohn argues, missionaries, like other colonial actors, interpreted Indian society through their own cultural and ideological biases. They often viewed Indian traditions as superstitious and oppressive, believing they needed reform through Christianity.[7] In Browne's words, this can be made clear: "By some painstaking research, to present a faithful view of a great philanthropic movement, undertaken by Christian rulers for their heathen dependents."[8]

Lata Mani, while discussing the colonial debates on sati, showed that the government was eager to reform similar practices to assert its moral authority and justify its rule. Women's issues were the battlefields where the moral authority of colonial rule was contested.[9] Hence, the British legal approach to infanticide was not a humanitarian endeavour centred on women's welfare, but rather a strategic operation to consolidate colonial authority.[10] Grey illustrates how the colonial state obsessed over female infanticide within specific high-caste communities. By isolating female infanticide as a product of oriental customs like dowry and caste pride, the British effectively transformed the Indian woman's body into the ground upon which they could demonstrate moral superiority. This focus conveniently ignored cases of child homicide committed by widows or unmarried women in England, which were driven by universal social stigmas that mirrored problems in themselves.[11] Similarly, in the study of Punjab, Veena Talwar Oldenburg contended that

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[7] Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 25–30.

[8] Browne, *Indian Infanticide*, xii.

[9] Lata Mani, "Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India," in *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989), 118.

[10] Daniel J. R. Grey, "'It Is Impossible to Judge the Extent to Which the Crime Is Prevalent': Infanticide and the Law in India, 1870–1926," *Law, Crime and History* 11, no. 1 (2021), 22-23.

[11] Ibid., 2-6.

following the brutal annexation of Punjab, the issue of female infanticide served as a moral justification for colonial rule. By framing high castes as inherently barbaric, the state constructed a narrative of a civilising mission. Therefore, efforts to curb female infanticide were a strategic political move to subjugate the newly acquired territory.[12]

## Region-wise Measures

The significance of the text lies in the meticulous, chapter-by-chapter documentation of the region-specific measures taken by British officials. The earlier attempts to address the female infanticide were traced back to Mughal Emperor Jahangir, who issued a proclamation aimed at punishing the perpetrators. A subsequent effort was led by Rajput King Jai Singh, who sought to regulate dowry and marriage expenses based on the annual income of one's estate.[13] He highlights that despite these efforts, the crime continued to go unchecked, and by tracing historical details, he emphasises the need for proper action under the superimposition of colonial authority.[14] Such historical tracing was intended not only to provide details but also to generate a need for superior authority, emphasising shortcomings in previous measures.

## From Personal Influence to Administrative Surveillance

In 1789, Jonathan Duncan, a resident of Benares, first 'discovered' the crime among the Rajkumar of the Rajput family, and the reason described was hypergamy.[15] Duncan set up a meeting with the 'Rajkumars' and asked them to take an oath renouncing the practice, but the meeting proved short-lived. Browne also highlighted the opinion of Charles Raikes, that the good men who were not involved in the practice might be tempted to imitate Rajput's example. Instead of a check, it would have been setting a premium on this

[12] Veena Talwar Oldenburg, *Dowry Murder: The Imperial Origins of a Cultural Crime* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 11, 21-22.

[13] Browne, *Indian Infanticide*, 21.

[14] Ibid., 22.

[15] Hypergamy refers to a marriage practice where the bride is married into a family of higher social rank, status or caste.

child murder;[16] and this observation can be correct because, despite the efforts, the practice prevailed and spread where it was not previously. Hence, the critical methodological approach of the author on the infanticidal measures taken by officials can be traced, where he critically evaluated some of the factors, such as the reasons for the failure of Jonathan Duncan's initiative and his focus on a single group[17] and he further keeps comparing measures and their impact throughout the text.

In the Baroda residency, Jarejahs were mentioned as the main caste practising female infanticide.[18] The author mentioned that Jarejahs were killing their daughters for 4900 years. To suppress infanticide, the term used by Major Walker was 'holy war' against this barbarous and unnatural custom.[19] The methods applied were to add references from the *Puranas* and the *Shastras*[20] for moral guidance and punishment, and even the reward of bearing the expense of the marriage of a newly saved daughter to establish a precedent. For example, Mr Elphinstone wrote a letter to Captain Barnewell in 1821, who was a political agent in Kathiawar (present-day Saurashtra region of Gujarat); he proposed to throw all the funds collected by fines into a fund to be distributed in proportion to the number of female children so far preserved.[21] The Infanticide Fund was established in various regions, with fines contributing to it based on varying criteria. The collected funds were reportedly used to cover marriage expenses; in contrast, the Dube sisters cited instances in which the funds were used for the Company's military-economic interests.[22]

A surveillance system was also implemented on the suspected Jarejah caste, tracking births, betrothals, marriages, and deaths and proclamations were issued in 1834 by Mr Willoughby outlining punishments for offenders and rewards for compliance.[23] By 1841, an assessment revealed that the Jarejahs

[16] Browne, *Indian Infanticide*, 28-29.

[17] Ibid., 31.

[18] Ibid., 32.

[19] Ibid., 36.

[20] Ibid., 43.

[21] Ibid., 47.

[22] Rashmi Dube Bhatnagar, Renu Dube, and Reena Dube, *Female Infanticide in India: A Feminist Cultural History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 110-11.

[23] Browne, *Indian Infanticide*, 48-51.

continued the practice, though the overall sex disparity in the region had begun to decline.[24] Whereas a local form of resistance and data manipulation can also be a reason for these improved sex ratios. Jarejah clans aggressively resisted surveillance, and later they suddenly started over-reporting male deaths relative to female deaths, or completely refusing to register any births.[25]

In Udaipur and Jaipur, Mr Launcelot Wilkinson of the Bombay Civil Service uncovered the existence of female infanticide. In 1821, Sir John Malcolm reported the practice in the Malwa region among Rajputs, attributing it to the difficulty of securing a suitable match for daughters, with pride being the primary reason for destroying female infants. Browne wrote, according to an intelligent Rajput chief, that at least 20,000 female infants were killed annually in Malwa and Rajputana. Investigations confirmed the prevalence of this practice. To curb it, a combination of sumptuary measures and education, with a coercive approach, was suggested. According to Malcolm, when these measures were applied to the Malwa region, they delivered a death blow to the practice of infanticide.[26] During these discussions, Rajput chiefs agreed to renounce infanticide if the British government covered a portion of the marriage expenses for daughters and proposed that the expense should be limited to one-tenth of the bride's father's annual income.[27] However, the actual implementation of this proposal was not discussed in the text, but this detail is significant for understanding how the chiefs were engaging in the negotiations and taking advantage of them; there are instances of receiving funds for marriage.

In the Bengal Presidency, after 1789, no significant measures were taken until interest in the issue was revived, largely due to Christian missionaries' efforts, according to the author. He cites the example of Azamgarh in 1836, where Magistrate and Collector Mr Thomason discovered that Rajputs along the Oudh territory border were engaging in female infanticide. Among a population of 10,000, not a single daughter was forthcoming. Similarly, the Kooha region was reportedly devoid of daughters. Recognising the limitations of civil authority in eradicating the practice, Thomason prioritised discussion

[24] Ibid., 48-51.

[25] Bhatnagar, Dube, and Dube, *Female Infanticide in India*, 141-48.

[26] Browne, *Indian Infanticide,* 64-65.

[27] Ibid., 58-63.

and personal influence over coercion.[28] Radhika Singha indicated that the pacification approach was prioritised when dealing with Rajputs to ensure they pay revenue consistently and peacefully.[29] In contrast, at Pargana Barra, a surveillance system was implemented that involved chowkidars, chaprasis, and midwives, who were required to maintain and submit separate birth records for cross-verification. In Browne's assessment, this surveillance approach proved effective in curbing crime.[30]

In the mid-Doab region, female infanticide was found to be widespread, with no girls reported among the Chauhan community. To curb the practice, new measures were introduced, including the mandatory reporting of female births by chowkidars to the nearest police station. A follow-up report on the child's health was required after a month, and in cases of infant mortality, a proper investigation was mandated.[31] Additionally, efforts were made to reduce marriage expenses, and the necessity of a law regulating these expenditures became evident.[32] Similarly, in the districts of Mainpuri and Etawah, officials worked to persuade people to lower marriage expenses.[33] Charles Raikes proposed several measures, including setting a fixed amount for marriage expenditures and imposing penalties for exceeding the limit. Anyone who violated the regulations or demanded more than the prescribed amount risked losing their social standing and judicial support. Even Brahmins, Bhats, Charans, and barbers were warned against encouraging extravagant marriage expenses. Restrictions were also placed on the number of guests allowed at wedding feasts. According to colonial officials, these measures directly targeted what they perceived as the primary motive behind female infanticide. In November 1851, a meeting was held with Rajput leaders to discuss these measures. Following this, a letter from Raikes, dated August 1852, was published and translated into Hindi. It traced and praised Rajput history while highlighting extravagant marriage expenses as a harmful practice and outlining the financial consequences of these customs for them.[34]

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[28] Ibid., 66-70.

[29] Radhika Singha, *A Despotism of Law: Crime and Justice in Early Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 130.

[30] Browne, *Indian Infanticide*, 70-72.

[31] Ibid., 66-78.

[32] Ibid., 81.

[33] Ibid., 81.

[34] Ibid., 82-98.

Similar efforts were undertaken in Agra, where a likewise narrative emerged; no girls were found among the Bhudoriahs of the Rajput clan, with exorbitant marriage expenses and the dowry demanded by the groom's father cited as the primary reasons. In 1851, Mr Gubbins conducted a census of children under 11, recording their numbers, castes, and clans, and compiling a list of suspected cases. Further information on births, particularly among Thakur families, was gathered with assistance from midwives and chowkidars. A total of 42 villages were placed under suspicion.[35] Here, a clear shift from discussion and influence to a rigorous surveillance system is evident. Browne enthusiastically cites the severe famine of 1838, which led to increased visits to villages and personal spaces for aid and relief, in turn resulting in the extraction of more personal information. Singha argued that the state used the moral urgency of saving infant lives to justify unprecedented intrusion into the domestic space. To enforce these measures, the British established an intensive, localised surveillance apparatus.[36]

In the case of Punjab, the Sikhs were found practising female infanticide to an equivalent degree as the Rajputs. Browne discusses the causes and the measures taken in the Punjab in considerable detail. He stated, "So notorious has been the crime of infanticide among them that a Bedee was generally known by the opprobrious title of Kooree Mar, or "daughter-slayer"."[37] Here, pride rather than poverty was identified as the primary reason for female infanticide. The Sikhs, as an influential class, were deeply involved in this practice. Troubled marriage alliances, such as those between Bedis and Khatris, were also highlighted as a cause. The account of Dharam Chand Bedi's daughter's marriage to a Khatri is described as disrespectful. From that day onward, it was said that no Bedi allowed a girl child to live. According to the text, the Bedis continued this practice for 300 years, and any Bedis who chose to save a daughter were treated as sweeper.[38] Ultimately, the desire to uphold social prestige through marriage alliances and the financial burden of extravagant wedding expenses were identified as the key motives behind female infanticide here.[39] Among high-ranking rajahs, marriage expenses for

[35] Ibid., 99-107.
[36] Singha, *A Despotism of Law*, 135-136.
[37] Browne, *Indian Infanticide*, 114.
[38] Ibid., 112-116.
[39] Ibid., 128-129.

daughters varied significantly, ranging from ten thousand to as much as twenty lakhs. The primary causes behind such exorbitant costs were identified as religious customs and deep-seated traditions of lavish wedding expenditures.[40] However, drawing from the work of Ibbetson's and Prakash Tandon, Anshu Malhotra demonstrates that there was a tendency of hypergamy among high castes, but it was isogamy[41] that was widely established as the norm of marriage even in high castes.[42]

A political agent in Ambala and an assistant in Ludhiana, under the Resident of Delhi, helped establish a system of local governance that aimed to recommend social, administrative, and political measures. Within this framework, the issue of female infanticide received some attention. Between 1822 and 1846, several proclamations were issued across these states, condemning the practice and highlighting its devastating impact. However, these efforts yielded negligible results.[43] In 1846, John Lawrence was appointed the first commissioner of the Jalandhar region. He sought to suppress female infanticide through personal communication and influence.[44] However, the results remained unsatisfactory, and Charles Raikes's method from Mainpuri was chosen for implementation. Discussions were proposed to address obstacles in intermarriage between Bedis and Khatris. On 4 April 1853, a gathering near Jalandhar took place, aiming to facilitate marriage between clans and curb female infanticide. Agreements were made to establish marriage customs and expenses that were both economical and acceptable.[45] A similar discussion about marriage expenses took place in the lower hill regions of Hoshiarpur, particularly among Rajputs. However, by mid-1853, Montgomery realised that isolated efforts were neither effective nor consistently followed.[46]

To address these issues, key points were proposed for discussion in Amritsar meetings: Declaring female infanticide equivalent to murder, thereby

[40] Ibid., 140.

[41] Marrying within the same status level.

[42] Anshu Malhotra, *Gender, Caste, and Religious Identities: Restructuring Class in Colonial Punjab* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 52-53.

[43] Browne, *Indian Infanticide*, 133.

[44] Ibid., 134.

[45] Ibid., 136-37.

[46] Ibid., 138-39.

subjecting it to the same criminal charges and establishing a consensus to limit marriage expenses. Official proclamations were circulated throughout Punjab to reinforce these measures.[47] In 1853, Diwali was deliberately chosen as the meeting date for its auspicious significance, while Amritsar was selected as the venue for the presence of the revered Golden Temple. The location and timing were also chosen to facilitate easy gathering, encourage broader participation, and highlight the British understanding of people's mindset. Men from all ranks, races, and faiths were said to have been called upon to ratify a common bond, emphasising the collective effort to reform social practices, particularly in curbing female infanticide and regulating marriage expenses.[48] Laws passed in 1853 to regulate expenses led to the abolition of customary subsidies given to village heads to maintain village *chaupals*, making marriage expenses more difficult and costly. These subsidies had previously allowed villages and families to share resources for communal events such as weddings.[49]

Browne referred to the Amritsar meeting as a "Great Epoch in the History of the Anti-Infanticidal Movement."[50] According to him, delegates from up to 200 miles around Amritsar, representing the agricultural and trading communities of every district, along with commercial and municipal leaders from various cities, gathered for this event.[51] His work provides details about the commissioners and attendees present. Scales of marriage expenditures were determined for different castes and communities, though the text does not provide comprehensive details. A four-tier expense categorisation was drafted, and additional costs for Brahmins, barbers, and other customary expenses were also reduced.[52] The Governor-General in Council described the outcome of the Amritsar meeting as "the commencement of a new social era among the people of the countries beyond the Jamuna."[53] In his own words, the importance could be understood, "In that Umritsur [Amritsar] meeting

[47] Ibid., 142-44.
[48] Ibid., 152-56.
[49] Oldenburg, *Dowry Murder*, 13-16.
[50] Browne, *Indian Infanticide*, 144.
[51] Ibid., 144-47.
[52] Ibid., 147.
[53] Ibid., 151.

was rung the knell of female infanticide in Punjab!"[54] Anshu Malhotra argued that this mandatory expense list set up a process of "upward mobility."[55]

The author dedicates three separate chapters to discussing the Amritsar efforts, which in itself highlights the significance of the meeting and the value he attributed to it. A full chapter lists the attendees, provides comprehensive records of the discussions, and emphasises the difficulty of organising this meeting, conveying to the reader the extensive effort involved. However, he did not include data on marriage expenditures, which is crucial in a discussion of this nature. Given that a separate chapter details the meeting participants and their seating arrangements, the absence of this essential statistical data is a significant omission.

## Officially Identified Causes of Female Infanticide

Female infanticide is addressed in a way that it seems more of a custom or habitual practice of Hindus rather than addressing the underlying causes. For the colonial officials, two motives for female infanticide were pride and poverty.[56] Browne highlights the phenomenon of hypergamous marriage within the framework of societal pride and the excessive financial burdens associated with weddings, particularly in impoverished contexts. In his words, for Hindus, the birth of a daughter brings immense anxiety, as finding a suitable husband is a daunting task, and leaving her unmarried is seen as a great dishonour. A father is expected to bow before his son-in-law, offering him almost divine reverence while receiving inferior treatment in return. To avoid this humiliation or the risk of losing caste status, some fathers choose to end their daughters' lives at birth. The higher the caste, the more prevalent the practice. Except for Brahmins, the number of women decreased as one moved up the social hierarchy.[57] With this argument, it is evident that he is clearly avoiding attention to other forms of marriage practices prevalent in Northern India. Anshu Malhotra showed that in colonial Punjab, three forms of

[54] Ibid., 164.
[55] Malhotra, *Gender, Caste, and Religious Identities*, 47-71.
[56] Browne, *Indian Infanticide*, 11.
[57] Ibid., 11.

marriage were prevalent: *vata-satta, pun,* and *takka*.[58] Although the pun form of marriage was considered ideal, the most commonly practised forms were *vatta-satta* and *takka*. Later, with colonial intervention, *takka* became the "selling of the daughter."[59] Thus, despite the aim of improving the institution through colonial intervention, their limited understanding of marriage norms led to modifications of diverse marital cultures, a topic extensively examined by anthropologists.

He also highlights a second, more apparent reason, which was poverty or, in their understanding, wedding expenses. He acknowledges that poverty as a factor was initially overlooked when measures were taken to curb the practice. The financial strain caused by exorbitant wedding expenses, largely driven by the practice of hypergamy, played a significant role in the issue. Drawing a comparison with England, he highlights that wedding expenses there were optional, whereas in India, they were an unavoidable obligation.[60] The dowry and gifts payable to the other side or in-laws are mentioned; there are almost twenty such occasions when the father has to pay or give gifts between betrothal and marriage. And one more extravagant expense occurs on the day of marriage when *bhats* and *charans* visit. He mentioned that they exist almost everywhere and demand money.[61] The colonial understanding of infanticide was summed up in one line, "Hindoos pride and his purse are sought to be saved by the sacrifice of his child,"[62] without elaborating on any other causes.

He stated that a poor man earns no more than 4 annas per day, while a daughter's marriage ceremony can easily cost him between 200 and 300 rupees.[63] Although he acknowledges the struggles of the poor and provides relevant or exaggerated data, the text remains largely silent on the occurrence of infanticide among them. While he discusses poverty as a contributing factor, his analysis primarily focuses on the higher classes, leaving the extent of the practice among the lower economic classes unclear. Through regional

[58] Pun marriage without price; *vatta-satta* by exchange of reciprocal betrothal and *takka* for bride price.

[59] Malhotra, *Gender, Caste, and Religious Identities,* 61-70.

[60] Browne, *Indian Infanticide*, 10-13.

[61] Ibid., 13-14.

[62] Ibid., 18.

[63] Ibid., 17.

analysis and the causal factors identified in his framework, it can be argued that hypergamous marriage practices and wedding expenditures were targeted as the primary drivers of female infanticide. Scholars addressing these themes have critically examined these factors, highlighting conceptual flaws that disproportionately attributed the practice to cultural customs.

## The Paradoxes of Anti-Infanticide Policies

The major interventions were directed primarily towards the Rajputs and Sikhs, highlighting a deliberate and selective approach by colonial officials. Anshu Malhotra demonstrated that among the majority of revenue-paying and military-recruited Jats, female infanticide co-existed with bride price; they were hardly engaged in hypergamy and were largely ignored until the late 19th century.[64] Even the Muslims were found practising female infanticide in colonial Punjab, where dowry wasn't a custom; Oldenberg's investigation revealed that the families involved were also revenue defaulters.[65] Dube sisters' analysis also points out that the Jarejah of Kutch and Kathiawar actually practised bride price.[66] Therefore, the selective approach towards certain caste groups should not be viewed merely as a lack of knowledge. Instead, it should be understood within a framework that provides justification to humanitarian efforts while ignoring those who were the subject of their own benefit, and blames the causes of pride and poverty to mask the impact of their own economic policies.

Oldenburg explicitly refutes the colonial claim that the custom of expensive dowries caused female infanticide. In pre-colonial Punjab, dowry was a voluntary safety net and an indigenous, woman-centred institution over which brides held property rights. She asserts that the British imperial state used the narrative of cultural practices and dowry expenses as a convenient alibi to mask the devastating economic policies, peasant indebtedness, masculinisation of the economy and poverty caused by their own revenue

[64] Malhotra, *Gender, Caste, and Religious Identities*, 57.
[65] Oldenburg, *Dowry Murder*, 6.
[66] Bhatnagar, Dube, and Dube, *Female Infanticide in India*, 132.

policies.[67] Similarly, military recruitment created a situation that favoured son-preference society even more strongly than in the pre-colonial period.[68]

The skewed sex ratio is a major problem in contemporary India. Social transformations initiated during the colonial period, combined with the advancement of modern technology, have altered the practice of female infanticide into the more concealed and technologically facilitated form of female foeticide. It is widespread even in Southern India, where these practices did not previously exist, including in matrilineal societies such as the Nairs of Kerala.[69] Despite governmental efforts to regulate and prevent such practices through legislation such as the Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (PNDT) Act, individuals continue to exploit legal and procedural loopholes to perpetuate them.

## Conclusion

The discussion of the *Indian Infanticide: Its Origin, Progress and Suppression* sheds light on how colonial authorities understood and managed female infanticide, highlighting not only the strategies employed to curb the practice but also the ideological context in which these measures took place. The discussions among colonial officials about persuasion, surveillance, regulating marriage expenses, and administrative oversight illustrate that anti-infanticide policies were intertwined with broader governance strategies. The text provides significant insights; focus on Rajputs and Sikhs reveals a deliberate tactic, neglecting the wider social and regional dynamics of the issue. The colonial framing of pride and poverty further exposes an oversimplified view of Indian society, reducing a complex social phenomenon to superficial cultural explanations.

At the same time, it is essential to critically consider John Cave Browne's perspective, official oversight, and the intended audience, all of which

[67] Oldenburg, *Dowry Murder*, 4-16.

[68] Prem Chowdhry, *The Veiled Women: Shifting Gender Equations in Rural Haryana, 1880–1990* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 32-35.

[69] Kumkum Sangari, "Settled Alibis and Emerging Contradictions: Sex Selection, Dowry and Domestic Violence," *Economic & Political Weekly* 47, no. 40 (August 25, 2012): 40-41.

influenced the narrative and introduced biases. The depiction of female infanticide became part of a larger colonial discourse that tended to exaggerate such practices to justify British rule. Humanitarian intervention, therefore, served a dual purpose: it enabled deeper social intervention and surveillance while maintaining political legitimacy. Efforts to regulate customs and marriage expenditures had unintended effects, such as entrenching caste divisions and expanding marriage expenses through social emulation and aspirations for upward mobility. Consequently, colonial anti-infanticide initiatives should be viewed not merely as reform efforts but also as tools of authority that reconfigured social relations and marriage practices across colonial India.

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# Disjuncture between Policy and Lived Experiences: A Study of Disasters in the Nilgiris, Tamil Nadu

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*This paper reviews the Disaster Management Act (DMA) 2005 and the policy document titled The State Disaster Management Perspective Plan 2018-2030 and examines the specificities of this text in the context of the lives of Paniya community members of the Nilgiris in Tamil Nadu. This archival analysis begins with establishing the effects of climate change in the region and presents an argument that Nilgiris is a flood-prone district. Further, the paper discusses DMA 2005 to understand its functioning and shortcomings in providing relief and rehabilitation to the members of the Paniya community. The next section of the paper moves on to analyse the state policy on the disaster management plan, published in 2018, and tries to understand its shortcomings in providing adequate support to the community and the Nilgiris region, in the time of heavy rains and floods. The final section of the paper situates the report within the limits of the international action plans for climate change.*

**Keywords:** Disaster Management Policy, Floods, Climate Change, Pre-existing Vulnerabilities, Nilgiris.

## Introduction

The Nilgiris district of Tamil Nadu witnessed heavy rainfall and flooding in the month of August, 2019. The intensive downpour managed to displace over 1,500 people and resulted in damage to agricultural lands. Six people lost their lives during the heavy rains and floods in the Nilgiris district. In just about four days, the region had recorded a rainfall of 2,500 mm, which is said to be the highest recorded rainfall thus far in the district. Continuous avalanches, increasing levels of water, flooding of water bodies, and the collapse of houses and buildings had caused large-scale damage to life and property. Areas such as Avalanche and Gudalur had been drastically affected by the heavy rains and floods in Nilgiris.[1]

[1] Shivani Ramakrishnan, "Tamil Nadu Rains: Six Dead, over 1,500 Displaced as Nilgiris Reels under Flood," *The Indian Express*, 14 August 2019,

The Nilgiris are home to members from six Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), namely Toda, Kota, Irula, Kurumba, Kattunayaka, and Paniya.[2] The total population in Nilgiris amounts to 7,94,697, of which the tribals make up about 32,813.[3] Paniya community members are predominantly found in the Gudalur and Pandalur regions of the district.[4] As per the 2011 census, the total population of the Paniya community members is 9,824.[5] Paniya community is the most vulnerable section in the district, and most of the members are landless and work as daily wage earners in tea-estate plantations and can be found engaged in construction work as well.[6]

The methodology used in this paper is a combination of analysis of textual archives, as well as oral narratives from and about the experiences of Paniya community members. The timeline for my fieldwork was between 10 November 2019 and 28 November 2019 at Pandalur and Gudalur taluks of the Nilgiris. This was a part of my Master's dissertation, the aim of which was to understand how pre-existing vulnerabilities in the Paniya community intensified after the heavy rains and floods that broke out in 2019. I conducted my field work in the Pandalur and Gudalur regions of the Nilgiris, where Paniya community members mainly reside. I visited three colonies of Paniya community members in Pandalur taluk, namely Paniya Rehabilitation Farm (PRF), Manjara and Pothukoli. I also visited a colony called Thenvayal in Gudalur taluk, wherein Paniya community members reside. I interviewed around 26 Paniya women and girls from the colonies. Apart from that, I interviewed three health staff officials from a civil society organisation (CSO),

https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/chennai/nilgiris-floods-heavy-downpour-kills-six-near-avalanche-5905118/.

[2] C. R. Sathyanarayanan, "Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) of the Nilgiris: An Update," *Man and Life* 50, nos. 3–4 (2024): 91–128.

[3] Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India, *Population Census 2011*, Table ST-14, "Scheduled Tribe Population by Religious Community (District Level), Tamil Nadu, District The Nilgiris, 2011" (New Delhi: Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, 2011), https://censusindia.gov.in/nada/index.php/catalog/12482.

[4] Jakka Parthasarathy, *Socioeconomic Appraisal of the Paniyans and Kurumbas of Nilgiris District, Tamil Nadu* (Ooty: Tribal Research Centre, 2007), 16.

[5] Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India, *Population Census 2011*, Table ST-14, "Scheduled Tribe Population by Religious Community (District Level), Tamil Nadu, District The Nilgiris, 2011."

[6] S. Anandakumar and G. Ramakrishnan, "The Paniya Tribes in Nilgiri Hills of Tamil Nadu," *Learning Community* 11, no. 1 (2020): 53–61.

namely Nilgiris Adivasi Welfare Association (NAWA). I also interviewed two health staff members from Adivasi Munnetra Sangam (AMS), which is another CSO based in these two regions of the Nilgiris. In total, I spoke to about nine health professionals and eight official staff from CSOs and local panchayat offices.

The following sections make an attempt to summarise some of the effects of climate change in the Nilgiris. According to the author Sibi Arasu, three reasons have been charted for the decline in the ecological conditions of the district.[7] Firstly, this was due to the mass destruction of the grasslands during the colonial period. The move by the colonisers was enacted in order to make space for the growth of tea plantations. Secondly, in post-independent India, exotic species such as eucalyptus were planted with the intent of obtaining firewood and paper. This move further diminished the rate of grassland growth in the district. Lastly, in the post-reform period of the 1990s, rapid urbanisation had taken place in the Nilgiris district, followed by the opening up of places like Ooty to tourism.[8]

The adverse impact of these factors can be understood through the unpredictable nature of the rainfall patterns. The rainfall is said to be 'intensive', even though the number of rainy days has gone down severely.[9] The average level of rainfall in the past was observed for almost 120 days. However, in the year 2019, the main spell of rainfall was observed only for 85 days. It is also brought to our notice that the number of rainy days was limited, in spite of 2019 being one of the "wettest" years in Nilgiris district.[10] The process of decrease in the presence of grasslands has, in turn, affected other species and life-cycle processes. Due to the shift in the climatic and vegetational conditions in the Nilgiris district, there seems to be a gradual

[7] Sibi Arasu, "Nilgiris Threatened by Climate Change," *The Wire*, 9 February 2018, https://thewire.in/environment/niligiris-climate-change-rainfall.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Rohan Premkumar, "Fewer, Sharper Showers Becoming a Norm in the Nilgiris Due to Climate Change," *The Hindu*, 19 December 2019, https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Coimbatore/fewer-sharper-showers-becoming-a-norm-in-the-nilgiris-due-to-climate-change/article30323770.ece.

[10] Ibid.

decrease in the presence of the montane grasslands in the area.[11] This in turn was expected to reduce the number of the already endemic Nilgiri Tahr (Hemitragus hylocrius), which depend on the grasslands for their feed.[12] This was predicted in the year 1995. Over two decades later, in another study on Nilgiri Tahr, it was found that the sustainable habitat for the existence of the Nilgiri Tahr could be at risk, according to the current projections of the climate change indicators.[13]

Apart from the heavy rains and floods in the Nilgiris district, other forms of environmental constraints also seem to be occurring in the area. Tea plantation production was hit by a severe frost attack in the months of December 2018 and January 2019. This reduced the production of the tea leaves in the area.[14] This, in turn, had impacted the livelihoods of the tea-estate workers and, after the severity of the intense cold conditions in the early months of 2019, the plants suffered further damage with the increase in temperature in the summer of March and April.[15] This phenomenon was followed by heavy rains and floods in August, which led to high rates of precipitation and which was followed by the erosion of the soil.[16]

Apart from rapid changes in weather patterns, urbanisation has increased in Nilgiris.[17] Hence, urbanisation and commercial tourism together have led to loss of biodiversity in the district, which in turn has affected the livelihoods of

[11] R. Sukumar, H. S. Suresh, and R. Ramesh, "Climate Change and Its Impact on Tropical Montane Ecosystems in Southern India," *Journal of Biogeography* 22, nos. 4–5 (1995): 533–36.

[12] Ibid.

[13] R. K. Sony, Sandeep Sen, Sunil Kumar, Monalisa Sen, and K. M. Jayahari, "Niche Models Inform the Effects of Climate Change on the Endangered Nilgiri Tahr (Nilgiritragus hylocrius) Populations in the Southern Western Ghats, India," *Ecological Engineering* (2018): 359, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecoleng.2018.06.017.

[14] Vishwanath Kulkarni, "No Longer the Right Climate for Tea," *BusinessLine*, 24 September 2019, https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/specials/india-file/no-longer-the-right-climate-for-tea/article29492946.ece.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

[17] R. Mamta, M. Jasmine Niketha, and Geetha Srikanth, "Analysis of Deforestation and Land Use Changes in Kotagiri Taluk of Nilgiris District," *Indian Journal of Science and Technology* 9, no. 44 (2016): 1, https://doi.org/10.17485/ijst/2016/v9i44/105326.

the communities living and depending on the natural resources.[18] I wish to borrow from Moore's work, to add that it is, hence, difficult to separate human and nature as two independent entities, and a better view could be to locate "humanity-in-nature" and "nature-in-humanity" to understand climate change and its impacts.[19] The localised effects of global climate change are further exacerbated by human-induced actions such as deforestation, rapid urban planning, and could be seen as one of the factors for the increased flooding in the area. In the following section, I introduce the Disaster Management Act (DMA) of 2005 and try to locate the experiences of Paniya community members in securing relief compensation after the floods in 2019.

## DMA 2005 and the experiences in securing relief

According to the DMA 2005, any disaster can be defined as:

> a catastrophe, mishap, calamity or grave occurrence in any area, arising from natural or man-made causes, or by accident or negligence which results in substantial loss of life or human suffering or damage to, and destruction of, property, or damage to, or degradation of, environment, and is of such a nature or magnitude as to be beyond the coping capacity of the community of the affected area.[20]

Disasters can be divided into two kinds. One of them is a set of natural hazards that occur due to the change in the 'normal' temperament in the physical world of the Earth. The second are mostly human-induced in nature, and they contribute to the larger phenomenon related to climate change. The latter of the two has been one of the driving forces in the rapid increase in extreme

[18] Indrani Vennelakanti and Sankara Moorthy K., "The Rising Tide of Overtourism and Carrying Capacity in the Nilgiris: A Case Study," *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Cases: An International Case Journal* (2026): 2, https://doi.org/10.1177/21649987251411651.

[19] Jason W. Moore, "Introduction: Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism," in *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, ed. Jason W. Moore (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2016), 1–11.

[20] V. Bhaskar and Vijay Kelkar, "Financing Disaster Management: Options for the GST Council and the Fifteen Finance Commission," *Economic and Political Weekly* 54, no. 25 (2019): 39–47.

weather events such as floods, cyclones, landslides, forest fires, droughts, and earthquakes.[21]

Herein, it is also important to understand the meaning of the term 'extreme weather events'. Extreme weather events, which are also called climate extremes, are defined by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) as the:

> occurrence of a value of a weather or climate variable above (or below) a threshold value near the upper (or lower) ends ('tails') of the range of observed values of the variable. Some climate extremes (for example, droughts and floods) may be the result of an accumulation of weather or climate events that are, individually, not extreme themselves (though their accumulation is extreme).[22]

The IPCC further elaborates that what is defined as an extreme weather event can differ from one region to another in absolute terms.[23] Moderate climate events can accumulate over a period of time to cause the phenomenon of climate extremes.[24] Having understood the effects of climate change on Nilgiris in the previous section, it is important to note that the heavy rains and floods caused during the month of August 2019 can be categorised as a disaster and also as a part of the extreme weather events occurring in the Nilgiris district.

After providing a suitable definition for what constitutes a disaster, the Act goes on further to provide a definition for disaster management, i.e, disaster management is a "continuous, coordinated and comprehensive approach to the planning, funding, and implementation of all the steps in the disaster cycle of mitigation, relief, and reconstruction."[25] Three authorities have been set up

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[21] Tamil Nadu State Disaster Management Authority (TNSDMA), *State Disaster Management Perspective Plan 2018–2030* (Chennai: Government of Tamil Nadu, 2018), 42.

[22] Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), *Managing the Risks of Extreme Events and Disasters to Advance Climate Change Adaptation: Special Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, ed. Christopher B. Field et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 30.

[23] Ibid., 40.

[24] Ibid., 116.

[25] Bhaskar and Kelkar, "Financing Disaster Management," 40.

for fulfilling the aims of the DMA, i.e., the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), the State Disaster Management Authority (SDMA) and the District Disaster Management Authority (DDMA). The NDMA, headed by the Prime Minister, is responsible for charting out disaster management policies, while also specifying the functions of the SDMAs and the ancillary departments, and providing approval to the disaster management's national plan.[26] The NDMA is further assisted by the National Executive Committee (NEC), which is headed by the Home Secretary. At the state level, the SDMA is headed by the Chief Minister, and the executive powers lie with the State Executive Committee (SEC), which is headed by the Chief Secretary, along with the secretaries of the other departments. The District Collector heads the DDMA at the district level. This is the decentralised version of the different authorities that have been created to uphold the mandates of the DMA.[27]

Apart from these, there are also two kinds of funds that have been set up at the three levels of governance. These funds are called the Disaster Response Funds and the Disaster Mitigation Funds.[28] The National Disaster Response Fund (NDRF) is controlled by the NEC in order to fulfil the demands of immediate response and relief that are required during the time of any disaster. The central government, any person or any institution can contribute to the funds of the NDRF.[29] The State Disaster Response Fund (SDRF) is controlled by the SEC, and the District Disaster Response Fund is controlled by the DDMA. Apart from the funds allocated for relief, the mitigation funds aim to reduce "the risk, the impacts, and effects of the disasters."[30] The dispatch of the National Disaster Mitigation Fund (NDMF) is controlled by the NDMA, the State Disaster Mitigation Fund (SDMF) by SDMA and the District Disaster Mitigation Fund (DDMF) by the DDMA.[31] Bhaskar and Kelkar have critically looked at the guidelines of DMA. Firstly, they say that the dispatch of funds for the NDRF comes from the authority of the NEC rather than the NDMA. Furthermore, the allocation of funds for the NDRF by the NEC is

[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.

highly "cumbersome and subjective".[32] Lastly, the NDMF, DDMF and SDMF or the mitigation funds are yet to be operational and remain inactive as of now.[33]

Herein, attention needs to be drawn to some of the narratives collected in 2019, which were regarding the cash transfers that had occurred during the time of floods and heavy rains in the Pandalur and Gudalur taluks of the Nilgiris. These cash transfers were made only for the damage and destruction that the houses had suffered. According to the panchayat secretary of the Cherambadi office in the Gudalur taluk, the relief compensation that is provided is expected to cover three aspects, which include the losses suffered by the damage to the houses and infrastructure, the loss of agricultural produce, and the damage that is caused to the lives of the persons involved.[34] According to the details of the relief compensation that were collected from the taluk office of the Pandalur region, it was seen that, in total, the villages or areas that fell under the Erumad II region received a total of 68 cash compensations.[35]

The areas under the Erumad II region included colonies like the Paniya Rehabilitation Farm (PRF) and Manjara, which were close to the Kayyuni village. Out of the 68 relief compensations, 63 were provided for the category of "partially damaged" houses, and five were provided for "fully damaged" houses. Out of these 68 houses that were given relief compensations, 10 houses were categorised as "partially damaged" in the PRF colony, and the same was applicable to the two houses that met a similar fate in the Manjara colony. It is to be noted that no compensation was provided for the damage suffered to the health of the persons who were affected by the floods and heavy rains in both the taluks of Pandalur and Gudalur. Also, no form of compensation was provided for the losses faced by those who worked in the agricultural sector, and for about two weeks, their source of livelihood was lost.

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[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Interview with Sajith, 47-year-old Panchayat Secretary of Cherambadi, Gudalur, Nilgiris, by the author, 20 November 2019.

[35] I visited the Pandalur local panchayat office on November 19, 2019, to collect data on the relief compensations that had been provided to Paniya community members in Kayyuni village of Pandalur. I had met with the Panchayat staff, who had shown me the records of the 68 cash compensations that were given.

In the Manjara colony, all the houses faced leakage during the rains in August. According to the residents of the colony, no cash compensation was provided to any of them by the government. This stands in contradiction with the government records in the Pandalur Taluk office, which state that two houses had received a relief compensation of Rs 4,100 for the "partially" damaged houses. The oldest resident of the colony, a 60-year-old woman from the Paniya community, had said: "During the heavy rains, our roofs were leaking. We couldn't go out or even move from this place. We had to stay here only, where else can we go? Though everything was submerged in water, we had received no relief compensation."[36]

Only relief materials were provided by the officials of a civil society organisation (CSO) called Nilgiris Adivasi Welfare Association (NAWA), and the panchayat office had also provided them with only tarpaulin sheets as a substitute for the roof. The families had to leave their homes in the midst of heavy rainfall and had to go near the river to defecate. Most residents could not go to work and lost their livelihoods. They had to solely depend on the rations of food and relief materials to survive during this phase of heavy downpour. Regarding funds received during the time of the floods and heavy rains, it is to be noted that no funds had come from the NDRF during the heavy rains and floods in the Nilgiris in 2019. Bhaskar and Kelkar[37] state that the Government of India has recently been providing extremely limited direct relief assistance to the states, leaving the states to fend for themselves. In the case of the heavy rains and floods in the Nilgiris, all the funds received were from the SDRF.[38] A work proposal for the total reconstruction of the houses that were damaged had been submitted to the state government of Tamil Nadu. However, the total money was yet to be transferred.

The matter of funding clearly shows that, while funds were diverted for response and relief provisions, little or no emphasis has been provided for the efforts towards reconstruction. This could also be due to the fact that the DMA requires the SDRF to be transferred and used only for the provision of immediate relief and response. Furthermore, it is mandated by the DMA that

[36] Interview with Vellachi (60-year-old), Manjara Colony, Kayyuni Village, Pandalur, Nilgiris, by the author, 21 November 2019.

[37] Bhaskar and Kelkar, "Financing Disaster Management," 39–47.

[38] Interview with Sajith, by the author, 20 November 2019.

the funds from the NDRF can be used only in matters of the extreme nature of the disaster itself, and as an addition to the funds that are already spent by the state from its SDRF.[39] Hence, the DMA at its current mandate stops with providing relief, with no vision for focusing on rebuilding the assets that had been destroyed during any natural or human-induced calamity. In the next section, I critically look at The State Disaster Management Perspective Plan, 2018-2030, and understand its shortcomings, keeping my field data central to some of the arguments.

## The State Disaster Management Perspective Plan, 2018-2030

In the year 2018, the Tamil Nadu State Disaster Management Authority (TNSDMA) came out with a report titled "The State Disaster Management Perspective Plan 2018-2030". The report states its vision as: "To build a safe and disaster-resistant Tamil Nadu through a systems approach, inclusive development and mainstreaming disaster risk concerns into the development ethos of the State."[40]

The report mentions that it has chosen to apply the systems approach to understand the steps towards the prevention and mitigation of disasters. This is because the approach is said to focus on ecosystems at the local level. For instance, the report mentions how, in order to understand the situation of recurring floods and droughts, "the unit of treatment" would be the river basin rather than the whole area that comes under the district. The idea of choosing the systems approach, according to the report, is for the fact that the causes and effects of any disaster could be looked at in a holistic way. The goals of the perspective plan have been mentioned in 14 goals. Some of the goals include plans for comprehensive flood protection through structural and non-structural interventions; ways to minimise the risk of urban floods; enhancement of the resilience of farmers to face monsoons along with climate change; ways to recharge groundwater in blocks where it is depleted; and methods to deliver climate-resilient infrastructure for irrigation and drainage to reduce inundation and flood damages.[41]

[39] Bhaskar and Kelkar, "Financing Disaster Management," 39–47.
[40] TNSDMA, *State Disaster Management Perspective Plan 2018–2030*, 6.
[41] Ibid., 7-8.

For the district of Nilgiris, one of the 14 goals states that the plan intends to "reduce the risks in the areas that are prone to landslides, forest fire, etc". The plan also puts forth four priorities, which include ways to understand the risks posed by any disaster; to intensify the governance of the disaster risks so that there are better ways to manage and handle them; to invest in disaster risk reduction; and to improve preparedness in facing any kind of disaster and respond effectively. The intent of the report remains that the state is able to "build back better" after a disaster. The state or the district of Tamil Nadu that is affected is expected to manage the disaster by mitigating, responding, and reconstructing accordingly.[42]

The report also states that the disaster management plan of Tamil Nadu can be divided into three perspectives. Firstly, it outlines the ways of achieving Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR).[43] Secondly, it speaks about the prevention and mitigation of different disasters that occur in the state. Lastly, it puts forth a layout for the preparedness of the state and districts in combating the disaster, and how well they respond to the process of recovery and reconstruction.[44] The report further states that the vulnerability in the district of Nilgiris can be divided into landslide vulnerability and forest fire vulnerability, and puts forth the mechanisms by which immediate relief can be provided during these disasters.[45]

The report has several shortcomings, especially when it discusses the Nilgiris. Firstly, though the report mentions vulnerable people being the most affected by human-induced climate change and any other form of disaster, it fails to define which sections of the community or society are vulnerable. The nuances of caste and class are missing from the report as a whole, with the report failing to mention any particular social groups. According to Chambers, vulnerability extends the normative definitions of poverty, and is something more than just a lack of any basic want.[46] Vulnerability needs to be looked at in the context of

[42] Ibid., 8.

[43] Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) involves ways in which any disaster can be located beforehand, thus leading to its prevention. Further, it involves ways in which the impacts of a disaster can be mitigated, by planning to reduce the risk or shock.

[44] TNSDMA, *State Disaster Management Perspective Plan 2018–2030*, 32-33.

[45] Ibid., 33.

[46] Robert Chambers, "Editorial Introduction: Vulnerability, Coping and Policy," *IDS Bulletin* 20, no. 2 (1990): 1–7.

rendering those affected "defenceless, insecure, and prone to further risks, shocks, and stresses."[47] Chambers goes on to explain that "external vulnerability" involves the unpredictable nature and extent of the risks, shocks, and stresses experienced by a person.[48] This could include extreme weather events such as floods, droughts, cyclones, storms, and earthquakes.

The unpredictable nature of the external vulnerability has a huge impact on the "internal vulnerability" of the person.[49] Internal vulnerability is usually determined by a person's ascribed status, social location, and economic conditions.[50] The Paniya community's vulnerability due to landlessness and living in houses which are made of clay and mud intensifies during the time of heavy rains and floods. For example, there are 16 families who reside at Thenvayal colony in Gudalur taluk. Their huts are located directly opposite the stream of the river. Every year, the river is said to overflow during the rainy season, and the members of the community need to be relocated to the relief camps set in the government school nearby in Gudalur. Manikkam, a 61-year-old tribal leader of the colony, had said: "Every June (in the rainy season), we have to suffer. We are forced to call the Tasildhar of the taluk to arrange shelter for us in the relief camps."[51]

All 16 families were moved to the government school in Puthurvayal of Gudalur taluk. The water in the stream had overflowed during the heavy rains in August. This resulted in excessive flooding, and the colony was completely submerged in water. The residents of the colony had to stay in the school for about eight days. Manikkam noted: There was no destruction of property during the floods this time, as all the residents of the colony had tied their belongings to the roofs of their huts and locked their doors before shifting to the relief camp set up at the Puthurvayal government school.[52] Each family had received a relief compensation of Rs 4,100. The health issues faced by the Paniya community members in the colony included typhoid and diarrhoea.

[47] Chambers, "Editorial Introduction," 1–7.

[48] Ibid.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Interview with Manikkam, 61-year-old resident of Thenvayal Colony, Gudalur, Nilgiris, by the author, 18 November 2019.

[52] Interview with Manikkam, by the author, 18 November 2019.

The example of Thenvayal colony is placed here to stress the importance of providing special attention for social groups such as the Paniya community, and nowhere within the report by TNSDMA is there a connection made to the fact that pre-existing vulnerabilities of a tribal community can get intensified during extreme weather events such as floods and heavy rains.[53] This brings us to the second limitation of the report, which is that, while Nilgiris has been defined as being vulnerable to landslides, forest fires, and seismicity, the report fails to address that the district is prone to floods. By not defining the district as being flood-prone and vulnerable, the report fails to allocate appropriate relief, mitigation, and reconstruction procedures required for a flood-hit area. The report seems to ignore the fact that Nilgiris has been experiencing recurrent heavy rains and floods. By not defining the vulnerability in the area, the issues surrounding the disaster also remain unaddressed.

Moving to the third limitation of the document, the word "gender" is mentioned only twice. Biswas points out that the efforts of "gender mainstreaming" have been limited to acts that are tokenistic in nature, and do not change the inequalities that women face, nor does it help them in getting justice.[54] The report by TNSDMA has a section called "Management of Relief Centres", wherein the emphasis is loosely given to the need of meeting "specific gender needs" in the relief shelters and providing women with "gender-segregated" washrooms.[55] It comes as no surprise that the "needs" of varying genders are reduced to the accessibility of "gender segregated" washrooms alone.[56] While not taking away the necessity of washrooms for all genders in order to have a safe and healthy sexual and reproductive health, it

[53] TNSDMA, *State Disaster Management Perspective Plan 2018–2030*, 153-54

[54] Biswas speaks about the roles of women being reduced to beneficiaries, or 'objects of charity' within the scope of "gender-mainstreaming" efforts. Such efforts from a policy perspective are meant to enhance equal opportunities to women, and policies themselves are built, enacted and monitored for increasing women's access to opportunities. However, Biswas states that such efforts remain as 'token gestures', rather than resulting in the change of the social positionality of the women or giving them any form of social justice. Nilanjana Biswas, "Gender and Disasters," in *India Disasters Report II: Redefining Disasters*, ed. S. Parasuraman and Unni Krishnan (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013), 126.

[55] TNSDMA, *State Disaster Management Perspective Plan 2018–2030*, 73.

[56] Ibid.

is necessary to understand that, starting from the access to other relief materials during the time of disasters to making policies with regards to mitigation and adaptation, the nature of addressing climate change has hitherto remained absent of expositions or commentaries on gender. The TNSDMA report fails to understand another lived reality of the Paniya community members. Most of the members of the PRF colony in Pandalur taluk openly defecate because there are no individual washrooms available. A 45-year-old woman from the Paniya community had said:

> The government (local panchayat) hasn't constructed individual household toilets for us. We are forced to openly defecate. Only one of the houses in the PRF colony has a pipe connection. Sometimes, we take water from that house. Otherwise, we take water from the well in the colony.[57]

Community members from the PRF colony had a lot of hesitation about staying in the relief camp set up for them in the Erumad government school in Pandalur taluk. According to the health inspector of the Kappala Government Hospital, located in Erumad of Pandalur, there were issues related to sanitation facilities in the relief camp.[58] Though sanitary napkins were provided as a part of the relief package, the issue of disposal became a major cause for concern, as there were not enough bins. Coming to the provision of sanitary napkins as a part of the relief package, NAWA had provided sanitary napkins to the Paniya women during the time of heavy rains and floods. However, Paniya women from the PRF colony had to visit the NAWA hospital located near their settlement to obtain sanitary pads. The assistant nurses at NAWA's hospital had said that, firstly, the napkins were only provided to those who requested them.[59] Secondly, the napkins were not provided to the older Paniya women since it is normatively perceived that the older women don't use them.

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[57] Interview with Acchati, 45-year-old resident of PRF Colony and tea-estate labourer, by the author, 13 November 2019.

[58] Interview with Kayendaran, 51-year-old Health Inspector, Kappala Hospital, Pandalur, Nilgiris, by the author, 15 November 2019.

[59] Interview with Bindu, 40-year-old assistant nurse, and M. R. Bindu, 32-year-old assistant nurse, Golden Jubilee Tribal Hospital, Pandalur, Nilgiris, by the author, 14 November 2019.

Herein, it can be understood that internalised biases can not only result in overt discrimination and denial of access to a key service, but such biases can also be used to justify the reasons as to why the provision of the key service is being denied to the community members in the first place. The TNSDMA report fails to recognise that gender inequities can be systemic in nature and very often rooted within the pre-existing vulnerabilities of a community. Since women and men undergo different kinds of vulnerabilities due to differences in the roles and functions attached to their respective genders, they also tend to experience environmental changes differently.[60] These constructed gender differences only increase the vulnerability and inequality faced by women during the time of disasters.[61]

The fourth limitation of the TNSDMA report is that it does not acknowledge how deeply-rooted the biases and stigma faced by a social group can be. These biases and stigma shape a vulnerable group's access to relief materials, the process of rehabilitation, and their adaptation strategies. Apart from adapting sustainable strategies to survive the implications of climate change, caste biases and discrimination can also affect people's access to shelters and relief camps. Pattnaik discusses how upper-caste individuals from Odisha had not allowed the entry of almost 85 Dalit community members into the shelters built at the time of the cyclone.[62] The spaces inside the shelters end up being occupied by upper-caste members by the time the Dalit community members manage to reach the shelters.[63] Pattnaik's work can be placed next to what I witnessed in my discussions at Pandalur taluk. Taking the example of the PRF colony in the taluk again, only 2 families out of a total of 27 had shifted to the government school relief camp in Erumad of Pandalur. Although most of the houses were submerged in water, Paniya community members stayed in their own places in the colony. Another CSO called Adivasi Munnetra Sangam (AMS) had also provided relief materials in the areas of Pandalur and Gudalur

[60] Patricia Kameri-Mbote, "Climate Change and Gender Justice: International Policy and Legal Responses," in *International Climate Law and Global Governance: Legal Responses to a Changing Environment*, ed. C. Roschmann, K. Ruppel-Schlichting, and O. C. Ruppel (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2013), 323–48.

[61] Kameri-Mbote, "Climate Change and Gender Justice," 323–48.

[62] Sudhir Pattnaik, "Multipurpose Cyclone Shelters and Caste Discrimination," *Economic and Political Weekly* 54, no. 21 (2019): 13–14.

[63] Pattnaik, "Multipurpose Cyclone Shelters and Caste Discrimination," 13–14.

taluks. Relief items like trampoline sheets and relief kits were delivered door-to-door to the villages in these taluks. The executive committee head of the AMS headquarters in Erumad had said:

> Most of the Adivasi community members find it difficult to come to the relief camps and be around people from other castes and communities. They find it uncomfortable to mingle with people from outside. So, our aim was to make sure that the relief materials reach them where they are, and we opted for door-to-door delivery in some villages around the Erumad region.[64]

To further elaborate on the stigma that the community faces, according to the director of the Tribal Research Centre (TRC), there is a cultural stigma around the community, which is a major reason for their self-isolation.[65] He added that Paniya women were more vulnerable than Paniya men. The aspect of stigma and discrimination is not adequately touched upon in the TNSDMA report, as mentioned before, it has not acknowledged the marginality of tribal communities in Nilgiris.

**Limits of International Action on Climate Change**

The plan proposed by the TNSDMA points out that the Tamil Nadu State Action Plan on Climate Change (TNSAPCC) is a way towards the Climate Change Adaptation Programme. For the implementation of the TNSAPCC, proposals have been submitted to mitigate climate change under the National Adaptation Fund for Climate Change (NAFCC) and the Green Climate Fund (GCF). The GCF is a financial mechanism adopted by the UN Framework Convention of Climate Change (UNFCCC), in order to provide assistance towards adaptation and mitigation to the "developing" countries.[66] Guerrero criticises the UNFCCC for promoting the agenda of the corporates and speaking their language, while calling for individual voluntary sponsorships

[64] Interview with Bharadhan, 56-year-old Executive Committee Head, Adivasi Munnetra Sangam (AMS), Erumad, Nilgiris, by the author, 15 November 2019.

[65] Interview with Dr. P. Subramaniam, 45-year-old Director, Tribal Research Centre (TRC), by the author, 22 November 2019.

[66] TNSDMA, *State Disaster Management Perspective Plan 2018–2030*, 149-50.

and "market-based initiatives".[67] The UNFCCC fails to acknowledge that the neoliberal capitalistic order has been created at the cost of the reproduction of massive "waste, pollution, and plunder".[68]

This paper discusses the observation of a higher set of vulnerabilities and a lower capacity of adaptation to the effects of climate change, especially in "poorer" or "developing" countries. The climate policies even in these countries fail to "problematise" the hand of capitalism and neoliberal order in being one of the chief driving forces behind human-induced climate change. The author proposes that neoliberal capitalism is far from being sustainable, and hence there is a need for its transformation into a system that does not project endless growth and capital accumulation as an aspiration to possess.[69] Moore, on the other hand, has pointed out that capitalism as a system has "put nature to work", hence any reconciliation for reconstruction must begin from a place of centring humanity and nature as symbiotic beings, which are interdependent.[70]

Moore brings further attention to capitalism's relation to "power, capital, and nature", all of which have together created what he calls today's "world-ecology".[71] According to him, the accumulation of capital, land, power, and the will to harness nature began as far as the 1450s.[72] The arguments by Moore become significant for understanding the TNSDMA report because, firstly, the report, per se, does not deal with questions of structural conditions such as capitalism, which have produced the conditions of climate change in a number of ways. Hence, the report lacks a vision to propose a suitable way for the reconstruction or transformation of societies, especially in post-disaster

[67] Dorothy Grace Guerrero, "The Limits of Capitalist Solutions to the Climate Crisis," in *The Climate Crisis: South African and Global Democratic Eco-Socialist Alternatives*, ed. Vishwas Satgar (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2018), 34.

[68] Neoliberal capitalistic order integrates the principles of liberalisation, globalisation and privatisation, to amass capital and mass-produce commodities, using modern technology and global networks. Guerrero opines that the market-driven activities of this order directly challenge and enhances the rate at which degradation of environment takes place. Guerrero, "Limits of Capitalist Solutions," 31.

[69] Ibid., 32.

[70] Moore, "Introduction: Anthropocene or Capitalocene?," 5.

[71] Ibid., 6.

[72] Ibid., 7.

conditions. The report looks at climate change as the sole cause and effect of all extreme weather events. This way, the TNSDMA report might not suitably address all the structural issues, which create and reproduce the vulnerability of a community such as the Paniyas in Nilgiris.

## Conclusion

Throughout this essay, I have firstly tried to situate the experiences of the Paniya community members in Nilgiris. Secondly, I have tried to place these experiences against the gaps in the DMA policy and the report of TNSDMA. One of the major criticisms of the TNSDMA report is its lack of addressing the pre-existing vulnerabilities of a community in an adequate manner. The second major limitation of the report is its inadequacy in terms of situating the Nilgiris as a "flood-prone" area. I believe that to address some of the other shortcomings of the report, TNSDMA needs to begin by looking at the socio-economic composition of places such as those in and around the Nilgiris, and diversifying its report according to the needs of the communities there. By defining Nilgiris as a flood-prone area, there might be a plausibility for getting specific funds for the disaster from the NDRF as well. However, even if these shortcomings are addressed, the concerns regarding the lack of capital in communities like the Paniyas still remain the same. A conversation regarding land redistribution needs to be brought in here, as being in possession of adequate holdings will provide the Paniya community with a better chance to both cope and adapt to heavy rains and floods.

One of the limitations of this essay is that most of my fieldwork and archival analyses were done in 2019. Since the COVID pandemic struck, I have not been able to revisit the field. Another limitation of the paper is that I am not from Nilgiris or the Paniya community. As a researcher, my own biases and political stances might have shaped the essay in the form that it took. To conclude, as an overall observational analysis, the TNSDMA has worked in the right direction in putting forth a much-needed report on disaster policy. However, it does need to address the impact of pre-existing vulnerabilities and global market structures on the ability of any community to mitigate, respond and reconstruct during the time of disasters.

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# *The Taj Story*: A Critical Examination of the Tejo Mahalaya Hypothesis in Cinematic and Architectural Context

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*This review critically examines the 2025 film The Taj Story and its dramatisation of the Tejo Mahalaya hypothesis, which claims that the Taj Mahal originated as a pre-existing Hindu Shiva temple. Its objectives are to assess the hypothesis against historical evidence and to affirm the monument's Mughal syncretism. The review draws upon primary sources, including Abdul Hamid Lahori's Padshahnama and the accounts of Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, as well as documentation from the Archaeological Survey of India and UNESCO, Supreme Court rulings, and scholarly critiques of P. N. Oak's arguments. The analysis demonstrates that the hypothesis lacks archival, archaeological, and judicial support, confirming the Taj Mahal's construction between 1632 and 1653 as the mausoleum of Mumtaz Mahal. The findings underscore the importance of evidence-based historiography in preserving accurate narratives of India's syncretic architectural heritage.*

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**Keywords**: Taj Mahal, Tejo Mahalaya, P.N. Oak, Mughal Architecture, Indo-Islamic syncretism, Pseudohistory, Historiography, Cultural Heritage

## Introduction

This review critically examines "The Taj Story" (2025), directed by Tushar Amrish Goel and produced by Swarnim Global Services Pvt. Ltd., starring Paresh Rawal. It tests the veracity of the film's portrayal of the Tejo Mahalaya hypothesis against contemporary historical sources. The study addresses three main questions: How accurately does the film represent the history of the construction of the Taj Mahal? Does the Tejo Mahalaya hypothesis withstand scrutiny when measured against contemporary primary records and material evidence? And what does the monument's architecture reveal about Mughal syncretism rather than appropriation? Drawing on Mughal chronicles, European travelogues, ASI and UNESCO documentation, and secondary

scholarship, chiefly Ebba Koch's work, the review argues that the film's central hypothesis rests on a selective interpretation of verifiable Mughal records.

Released in October 2025, *The Taj Story* enters the long-standing debate over the origins of the Taj Mahal by framing it as a courtroom battle between official history and an alternate narrative. This review addresses the film's dramatisation of the Tejo Mahalaya hypothesis while testing its claims against archival and material evidence. The analysis proceeds in three parts: a detailed examination of the film's narrative and evidentiary strategy, a close reading of contemporary historical sources, and an assessment of the Taj Mahal's documented architectural syncretism.

## The Film and the "*Tejo Mahalaya*" Hypothesis

*The Taj Story* opens with Vishnu Das (Paresh Rawal), a third-generation tour guide, mechanically reciting the canonical Mughal love story to tourists: Shah Jahan built the Taj Mahal as an eternal symbol of love for Mumtaz Mahal. A journalist's probing questions expose Das's private doubts, leading to a viral video in which he drunkenly questions the monument's provenance. Suspended from his job and ostracised by family and society, Das enlists a reluctant lawyer and files a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) demanding scientific investigation, including excavations around the foundation, carbon-14 dating of structural elements, DNA analysis of remains, and opening of twenty-two allegedly sealed basement chambers, to prove that the building was originally a Hindu temple and palace complex known as *Tejo Mahalaya.*

In the courtroom sequences, Das presents a series of so-called "scientific"[1] and linguistic arguments drawn directly from P.N. Oak's 1989 book, *Taj Mahal: The True Story*. He claims that Taj Mahal is a corruption of *Tejo Mahalaya*. The octagonal plan follows a Hindu mandala rather than Islamic geometry, and the finial is a disguised *kalash*. Also, the sealed basements apparently conceal pre-Mughal Hindu artefacts, and a purported 1950s carbon-14 test on a wooden fragment (conducted by American archaeologist Peter Williams) dates the structure centuries earlier. The screenplay toggles between claiming neutrality ("we only want to verify facts independently") and systematically

[1] The term "scientific" is used here as presented in the film's narrative and does not reflect the author's assessment of the claim's validity.

portraying Mughal records as "propaganda forged after 1400."[2] Opposing counsel Anwar Rashid (played by actor Zakir Hussain) defends the standard historical account. Yet, the film repeatedly stacks the deck by depicting official historians and ASI as biased or evasive. While the drama humanises Das's personal cost (family pressure, social boycott, and generational trauma), it ultimately endorses Oak's thesis (that the Taj Mahal was originally a pre-existing 12th-century Hindu Shiva temple-palace known as "Tejo Mahalaya," which Shah Jahan allegedly seized and converted) without applying the same evidentiary standards it demands of the opposing side.[3] The narrative structure allows the film to present pseudohistorical claims as courageous truth-seeking while sidestepping the absence of corroborating archaeological or documentary proof.

## Evidence from Primary Sources and Archaeology

Contemporary Mughal documentation directly contradicts the film's assertions. Abdul Hamid Lahori's *Padshahnama* (completed in the 1640s) records that after Mumtaz Mahal died in 1631, Shah Jahan selected the site on the Yamuna riverbank and acquired the land in 1632 through an equitable exchange of properties with Raja Jai Singh of Amber. Lahori describes the site as containing a "splendid domed mansion" that was part of the existing royal estate,[4] but the chronicle explicitly frames the project as the construction of a new royal mausoleum: foundations were laid, materials procured (including Makrana marble), and construction staged under the supervision of Ustad Ahmad Lahori, with the main mausoleum completed by 1643 and the full complex by 1653.[5] No reference to any pre-existing temple appears; the text describes the project as an entirely new royal mausoleum, built at a cost of approximately forty lakhs of rupees.

French jeweller and traveller Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, who visited Agra in 1640-1641 and again in 1665, explicitly states in *Travels in India* that the Taj

[2] Dialogue from The Taj Story (2025), directed by Tushar Amrish Goel.

[3] Plot details synthesised from public reviews and trailers of *The Taj Story* (2025).

[4] Abdul Hamid Lahori, *Padshahnama*, ed. Kabir al-Din Ahmad and Abd al- Rahim, 2 vols. (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1941-1943), vol. 2, 42-25.

[5] Abdul Hamid Lahori, *Padshahnama*, ed. Kabir al-Din Ahmad and Abd al-Rahim, 2 vols. (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1941-43), vol. 1, 403-4.

Mahal was built by Shah Jahan as a tomb for his wife. He observed the construction process, noting that, "I witnessed the commencement and completion of this monument on which 20,000 men have worked incessantly for 22 years."[6] Travernier makes no mention of any prior religious structure and details the employment of workers and the use of *pietra dura* inlay techniques, consistent with seventeenth-century Mughal expertise, which was previously unavailable.

The Archaeological Survey of India and UNESCO World Heritage documentation further confirm the monument's seventeenth-century date through brick foundations, marble sourced from Makrana quarries, and construction techniques such as a double-shelled dome and precise axial symmetry. No inscriptions, scriptural fragments, or artefacts indicate pre-Mughal temple use. The Supreme Court of India dismissed P.N. Oak's 2000 petition (and subsequent applications for sealed-room access or carbon dating) as "misconceived", describing his claims as a "bee in his bonnet" and noting that ASI has consistently classified the Taj Mahal as a Mughal tomb.[7] Later PILs seeking similar investigations have been rejected as "publicity interest litigation."[8]

These sources demonstrate that the film's portrayal of Mughal records as fabricated and its reliance on an uncorroborated 1950s carbon-dating claim (the purported 1950s carbon-dating claim by an American archaeologist named Peter Williams - a claim that has no verifiable record in scholarly or official archaeological literature) constitute selective and misleading historiography. Oaks's method (linguistic reinterpretation, selective analogy, and dismissal of primary texts) has been rightly critiqued as pseudohistorical by scholars such as Giles Tillotson.[9]

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[6] Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, *Travels in India*, trans. V. Ball, 2 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1925), vol. 1, 110-12.

[7] Supreme Court of India, P.N. Oak v. Union of India, Writ Petition (Civil) No. 225 of 2000 (dismissed on 13 February 2001).

[8] The Supreme Court of India has occasionally used the term "publicity interest litigation" for petitions that appear to seek publicity rather than genuine public interest (see e.g., P.N. Oak v. Union of India, Writ Petition (Civil) No. 225 of 2000).

[9] Giles Tillotson, "Architecture in Mughal India," in *The New Cambridge History of India,* pt. 1, vol. 4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 214-15.

## Architectural Syncretism in the Taj Mahal

Far from evidencing appropriation, the Taj Mahal exemplifies the Mughal synthesis of Persian, Timurid, Islamic, and indigenous Indian traditions. Commissioned by Shah Jahan and executed under Ustad Ahmad Lahori, the 42-acre complex employs a *charbagh* garden layout symbolising the Quranic paradise, axial symmetry, and an elevated riverfront terrace. The 73-metre double-shelled onion dome and slightly outward-tilted minarets reflect Timurid engineering refined for seismic stability. At the same time, Makrana marble, inlaid with *pietra dura* (lapis lazuli, jasper, jade), creates floral and calligraphic motifs that shift with changing light. Moreover, Amanat Khan's Quranic inscriptions employ optical scaling to achieve visual harmony.[10]

Indigenous elements, such as lotus spandrels, *chhatris*, *jali* screens, and peacock motifs, interweave seamlessly with the Islamic geometry and Persian arabesques. More than twenty thousand artisans from Persia, Central Asia, and India (including European specialists) collaborated to produce a cosmopolitan style characteristic of the high Mughal court culture. As Ebba Koch demonstrates in *The Complete Taj Mahal*, the monument transforms the Agra riverfront into a unified architectural metaphor of paradise, imperial power, and personal grief, achieving a "perfect fusion" rather than cultural erasure.[11] Koch further highlights how the Taj Mahal integrates ancient Indian aesthetic principles with Mughal forms, creating a syncretic masterpiece that transcends binary notions of Hindu versus Islamic.

## Conclusion

*The Taj Story* effectively dramatises the personal stakes of historical controversy but ultimately rests on an unsupported hypothesis. By expanding on the film's narrative, this review has shown how its selective use of Oak's arguments, its fabricated scientific claims, and its dismissal of primary records misinterpret the monument's documented history. Mughal chronicles, European travelogues, material analysis, and judicial rulings converge on a

[10] Ebba Koch, *The Complete Taj Mahal and the Riverfront Gardens of Agra*. (London: Thames & Hudson,2006), 120-145.

[11] Ibid., 45-47.

single conclusion: the Taj Mahal was constructed between 1632 and 1653 as Mumtaz Mahal's mausoleum.

The structure's enduring power lies in its syncretic brilliance, not in appropriation. Evidence-based historiography, prioritising verifiable primary sources over drama-driven reinterpretation, remains the only reliable safeguard for India's shared architectural heritage. Viewers and scholars alike should approach such cinematic interventions with scepticism and consult peer-reviewed research and original documents. Further scientific investigation, should it ever be warranted, must adhere to rigorous archaeological protocols rather than predetermined narratives. Only in this manner can the Taj Mahal continue to stand as a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a testament to India's rich, pluralistic past.

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# Mughal Cinema and Plot Construction: Reality v/s Myth

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*Cinema is regarded as one of the most influential medium of mass communication and socialisation in modern Indian society. It creates a lasting image in the minds of its audience. Although historical accuracy may differ, the manner in which the Mughal era — its political, socio-economic conditions, and Mughal rulers — has been portrayed becomes significant in the context of the Hindi film industry. To what extent have directors made compromises with the reality of history? This study critically evaluates the processes of narrative construction and explores how historical events are adapted, modified, or dramatised for popular consumption. In addition, this research also considers the broader socio-political context in which these films were produced and investigates the presence of directorial perspective or ideological bias in shaping historical representation. By analysing selected films, this study aims to assess the relationship between cinematic storytelling and historical reality, thereby contributing to the broader discourse on history, memory, and popular culture in India. The study will examine the ways in which the narrative content, structure, and modes of presentation in Hindi cinema have undergone transformation over time. It will also analyse how these films have been influenced by particular ideological currents and the market-oriented sensibilities characteristic of different historical periods. Therefore, this research will focus on significant films produced from the post-independence era to the present.*

**Keywords:** Hindi Film Industry, Mughal Era, Historical Representation, Ideological, Post-Independence Era.

## Introduction

The history of Hindi cinema may be traced back to 1913 with the release of *Raja Harishchandra*, directed by Dadasaheb Phalke, which is widely regarded as the first full-length Indian feature film. The first film based on the Mughal period, however, is considered to be *Anarkali* (1928), directed by the Imperial Film Company.[1] In the present study, the focus will specifically be on popular

[1] Kaushal Kishore Sharma, *Representation: The Portrayal of Mughal History in Indian Cinema, 1920–1957*, (University of Allahabad, 2019), 17.

Hindi cinema. The inspiration for this study came from watching the film *Chhaava (2025)*. As a student of history, I felt that this film lacked historical accuracy. When I viewed it from a broader cinematic perspective, a natural question arose in my mind: how has popular Hindi cinema reshaped the image of the Great Mughal rulers such as Akbar and Aurangzeb? Since Akbar's character is often associated with *Anarkali* and *Jodha Bai*, this study also examines the historical authenticity of the portrayal of historical figures in popular Hindi cinema. This study limits itself to a few selected popular films such as *Anarkali (1953)*, *Mughal-e-Azam (1960)*, *Jodha Akbar (2008)*, and *Chhaava (2025).*

Anarkali (1953), directed by Nandlal Jaswantlal, laid the foundation for Mughal-themed historical romance in popular Hindi cinema because the subject of courtly historical romance became popular and gained market success. The movie was based on Imtiaz Ali Taj's play *Anarkali* (1922), but Jaswantlal claimed that the story was derived from Mughal sources (figure 1). However, the truth is that Mughal contemporary sources barely mention Anarkali. The earliest reference to Anarkali appears in the seventeenth century through two British travellers, William Finch and Edward Terry.[2] During his tour of Lahore, William Finch saw Anarkali's tomb and wrote that she was one of Akbar's wives but had a relationship with Salim (Jahangir). Upon learning this, Anarkali was immured in the wall of the palace by Akbar, where she died. Later, Jahangir constructed a tomb as a symbol of love.[3] Edward Terry (1616–19) records that Akbar threatened to disinherit Jahangir from his will because Jahangir had lived a secluded life with Akbar's favourite wife, Anarkali. However, Akbar withdrew this decision at the time of his death.[4] The fact remains that both Finch and Terry lacked direct access to the Mughal harem, and therefore their accounts were largely shaped by imagination rather than contemporary evidence. Subsequently, historians from Lahore have continued to question and examine this historical event. However, *Anarkali* (1953), the cinema, based on Imtiaz Ali Taj's play, developed the character of Anarkali

[2] Aisha Dad, *Through the Looking Glass: The Narrative Performance of Anarkali* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2026), 20–25.

[3] William Finch, in *Early Travels in India, 1583–1619*, ed. William Foster (London: Oxford University Press, 1921), 166.

[4] Edward Terry, in *Early Travels in India, 1583–1619*, ed. William Foster (London: Oxford University Press, 1921), 330.

through traditional oral stories and *"kissa"* (an Urdu word referring to "story").[5] Although there is no historical evidence to substantiate the existence of a character like Anarkali, cinema has nevertheless kept her alive among us to this day.

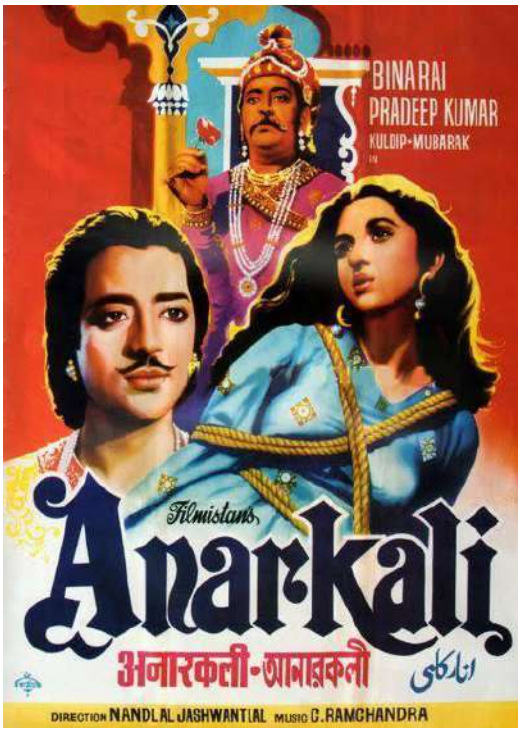


**Figure 1:** Official poster of *Anarkali (1953),* directed by Nandlal Jaswantlal
**Source:** IMDb, accessed 06 May 2026, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0045506/mediaviewer/rm3878269185/.

Another cult movie that elevated Mughal cinema to great heights was *Mughal-e-Azam*, which was released in 1960 (figure 2). Director K. Asif's aim in *Mughal-e-Azam* was to narrate history through the timeless love story of Salim and Anarkali. The film combines themes of love, rebellion, and sacrifice with Indian folk traditions. It tells the emotional story of Prince Salim and the court dancer Anarkali—a struggle between love and power that becomes symbolic. The clash between personal desire and imperial authority is central to the film and also reflects the political and social structures of that time. In this context, Emperor Akbar is shown not only as a powerful ruler but also as a father, torn between his duty to the empire and his love for his son. This portrayal turns

[5] Dad, *Through the Looking Glass*, 30.

Akbar from a simple character into a complex figure, showing his emotional struggles alongside the heavy responsibilities of leadership.[6]

**Figure 2**: Official poster of *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960), directed by K. Asif.
**Source:** IMDb, accessed 06 May 2026, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0054098/mediaviewer/rm4059533825/.

If we now attempt to examine the historical authenticity of this narrative, several limitations become apparent. The film depicts the rebellion of Prince Salim, and historically, during the final years of Akbar's reign, his eldest son did indeed challenge his authority. In 1599, Salim established his base in Allahabad. Therefore, K. Asif is not entirely incorrect in portraying the episode as a son's rebellion against his father. However, where he falls short is in his interpretation of the underlying causes of the rebellion. Prince Salim's actions were driven primarily by political considerations. His rebellion was not merely the outcome of personal ambition; rather, it stemmed from his belief that Akbar was systematically undermining his political network and authority. The film's two most controversial characters are Jodha Bai, portrayed as Akbar's wife, and Anarkali, depicted as Salim's lover. These characters appear to be based more on legend than on concrete historical facts. Without them, the film would undoubtedly not have been able to attract

[6] Dr. Khalid Bashir, "Dr. Ishfaq Ahmad Mir, Mughal-e-Azam and Its Revolutionary Impact on Indian Cinema: A Historical Exploration", *IRASS Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2(1), (2025): 1-6.

audiences.[7] The historical accuracy of *Anarkali* has already been discussed in detail, and the discussion on Jodha Bai will be elaborated further.

Another popular Hindi film is *Jodhaa Akbar* (2008), directed by Ashutosh Gowariker (figure 3). The film was made to commemorate the 400th birth anniversary of Akbar. Akbar is considered one of the greatest rulers in Indian history and is believed to hold a revered place in the collective memory of many Hindus. At a time when India periodically witnessed Hindu–Muslim tensions, the film explores themes of love, tolerance, and communal harmony. In particular, the marriage between Akbar and a Rajput princess is presented as a symbol of religious tolerance. Thus, the film attempts to reflect the social conditions of its time and suggests to the audience that harmony amid diversity is possible.

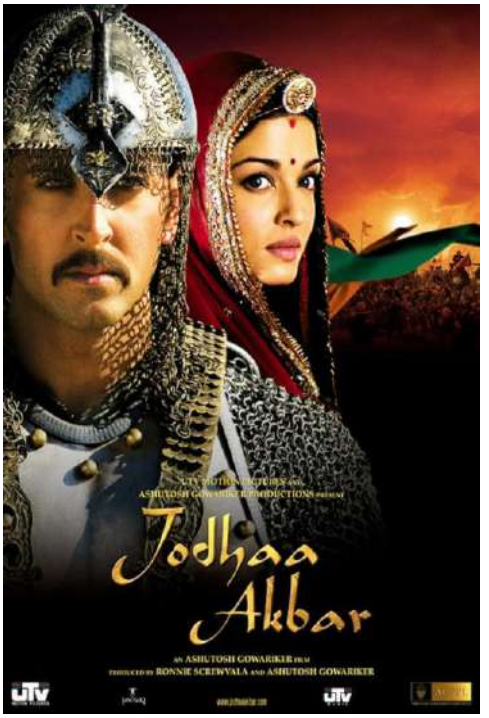


**Figure 3**: Official poster of *Jodhaa Akbar* (2008), directed by Ashutosh Gowariker
**Source**: IMDb, accessed 06 May 2026, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0449994/mediaviewer/rm533108224/.

[7] Syed Ali Nadeem Rezvi, "Representation of the Mughals in present-day India: From K. Asif's *Akbar* to the *Babur* of Nikkhil Advani", *Studies in People's History* (2022): 249-251.

The historical authenticity of this film has also been questioned, most notably regarding the acceptance of Jodha Bai as Akbar's wife. Significant Mughal sources such as Abul Fazl's *Akbarnama*, Abdul Qadir Badauni's *Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh*, and Nizamuddin Ahmad's *Tabaqat-i-Akbari* do not explicitly mention Jodha Bai. It was in the nineteenth century that British historians such as James Tod first referred to Jodha Bai as Akbar's wife.[8] Additionally, Mountstuart Elphinstone discussed Akbar's matrimonial alliance with the Rajputs in 'The History of India', though the specific identification of Akbar's consort as "Jodha Bai" appears more prominently in later historiography rather than in Mughal chronicles.[9] During the same time, the villagers of Sikri and Agra started identifying three architectural structures with her name, namely, the Jodha Bai Palace in the palace complex at Fatehpur Sikri, a small red sandstone tomb on the Agra–Sikri road identified as Jodha Bai's Tomb, as well as a platform tomb near Sikandara, now known as Mariam's Tomb, as Jodha Bai's other possible resting place. Ultimately, the legend of Jodha Bai, a wife of Akbar, gained popularity and wide acceptance after Mughal-e-Azam, so much so that when Jodhaa Akbar was being made, many 'Rajputs' agitated in anger over how one of their princesses was being shown as the wife of a Muslim king![10]

Historians argue that history is based on facts, sources, and evidence, whereas films often reshape events into a gripping narrative. For example, in *Jodhaa Akbar*, the abolition of the *jaziya* tax is depicted through an emotional and dramatic scene in which the people express their gratitude to the emperor. Although Akbar did abolish *jaziya*, the film presents it as a simple, immediate, and personal decision. In reality, however, administrative decisions undergo complex processes. Additionally, the film suggests that the title 'Akbar' was given to him by his subjects, whereas historical evidence indicates that he was given this name at birth. Thus, by altering the sequence and meaning of events, the film creates a new interpretation. The film repeatedly uses the symbol of a lion to represent Akbar's power and greatness, whereas historically this

[8] James Tod, *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan, or the Central and Western Rajput States of India*, Coronation ed., vol. 2 (London: Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, 1920), 95-105.

[9] Mountstuart Elphinstone, *The History of India: The Hindu and Mahometan Periods*, vol. 2 (London: John Murray, 1841), 316–326.

[10] Rezvi, "Representation of the Mughals in Present-day India," 249-250.

symbol was more closely associated with his son Jahangir. Furthermore, the scene of Akbar praying at the shrine of the Sufi saint Muin-ud-Din Chishti in Ajmer evokes a sense of spirituality, a theme that is not explicitly mentioned in historical sources. Moreover, the music, dance, and elaborate set pieces provide the audience with a vivid visual experience of Mughal culture; however, according to historians, these elements were added to enhance emotional impact and may distract viewers from an objective analysis. The film primarily centres on a love story, rather than on a comprehensive exploration of the period. The administrative achievements of the Mughal Empire, its military organisation, and significant religious developments, including the formulation of *Din-i-Ilahi*, receive limited attention. Likewise, broader socio-economic aspects, including the condition of the peasantry, the functioning of the *jagir* system, and the role and status of Mughal women, are not examined in any substantial or analytical depth.[11]

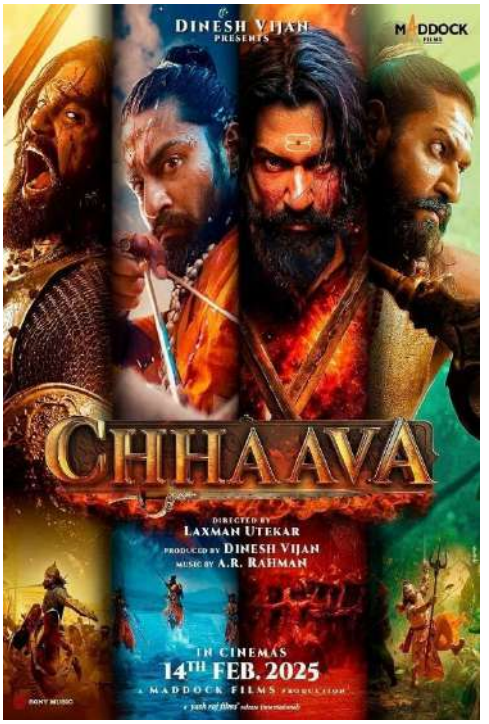


**Figure 4**: Official poster of *Chhaava* (2025), directed by Laxman Utekar.
**Source**: IMDb, accessed 06 May 2026,
https://www.imdb.com/title/tt27922706/mediaviewer/rm255170306/

[11] Makini T. N. Emmanuel, "A Critique of the Film *Jodhaa Akbar*," Academia.edu, accessed Feb. 22, 2026, 1-9, https://www.academia.edu/16908734/A_critique_of_the_film_Jodhaa_Akbar.

A recent popular film, *Chhaava*, has once again revived the debate between historical authenticity and commercial cinematic narrative (figure 4). *Chhaava* (2025) is a biographical drama directed by Laxman Utekar, based on the life and struggles of Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj, the heroic ruler of the Maratha Empire. The film not only presents a heroic saga but also examines the complex relationship between history, nationalism, and cultural identity. Its central narrative revolves around the conflict between the Maratha ruler Sambhaji and the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. It portrays Sambhaji as a courageous, patriotic, and resolute warrior who steadfastly resists Aurangzeb's imperial policies. The historical framework of the film is derived primarily from the Marathi novel *Chhaava*, authored by Shivaji Sawant. Consequently, the film is not grounded in primary historical sources; rather, it represents a literary reconstruction of historical events, shaped by narrative interpretation and creative imagination.[12]

The film depicts Aurangzeb as a harsh, expansionist, and ruthlessly authoritarian ruler, whereas Sambhaji is portrayed as a brave warrior defending his nation and faith. Historical sources, including Mughal court records and Marathi Bakhars, indicate that this conflict was primarily driven by political, strategic, and economic considerations.[13] The film frames the conflict as a battle between religion and lawlessness, of nation versus empire, transforming the complexities of history into simplified moral paradigms. It emphasises a moment in which the concepts of freedom and resistance come to the forefront. Consequently, Sambhaji is depicted not merely as a regional ruler but as a national hero.

In conclusion, we can say that popular Hindi cinema has witnessed a major shift in mythologisation from the 1950s to the present. In the 1950s, mythologisation was presented romantically through the immortal love story of Salim and Anarkali, which reinforced the spirit of cultural pride and nation-building through elements such as grandeur, loyalty, and sacrifice. By the 2000s, Hindi cinema increasingly focused on grand romance and visual splendour. These films appealed to modern audiences, representing Mughal

[12] Shivaji Sawant, *Chhaava, Chatrapati Sambhaji, And His Fight for Swarajya*, trans. Kadambini Dharap (Pune: Mehta Publishing House, 2025), 1-892.

[13] Saqi Mustaid Khan, *Maasir-i-Alamgiri: A History of the Emperor Aurangzib-Alamgir*, trans. Jadunath Sarkar (Calcutta: Royal Asiatic Society, 1947), 193-197.

rulers as symbols of cultural heritage and tolerance. Meanwhile, in the 2020s, the focus of films was no longer confined solely to love stories; instead, there was a marked shift as political conflicts and identity politics became central themes. In films such as *Chhaava*, Mughal history was redefined within the context of regional rivalries and contemporary socio-political debates. Thus, over the course of seven decades, Mughal-centric cinema evolved beyond romantic myth-making to become a medium for political and cultural reinterpretation, reflecting changing social concerns and audience expectations.

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# **Sabyasachi Bhattacharya.** ***Archiving the British Raj: History of the Archival Policy of the Government of India, with Selected Documents, 1858-1947*****. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2019, pp 235**.

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Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, in his book *Archiving the British Raj*, looked into archives not as mere neutral spaces for storing documents but, rather, as important instruments of political power. As Foucault theorised, the powerful voices dominate discourses and knowledge and power are inevitably intertwined. Using the colonial state's archival evidence, Bhattacharya operationalised this insight by showing that within the colonial framework, the dialogues between the historian and the facts were inherently shaped and influenced by contemporary power relations. He analysed them to show the dual purpose of the colonial archive; the records were instruments of governance as well as tools for reproducing Britain's imperial image. This underlying tension was fundamental in the shaping of the archival policies under the colonial state. This was exemplified by the Cunningham episode of 1849 mentioned by Bhattacharya. Penalising a government official for the critical citing of official records set a precedent, barring other officers from using official records (pp. 3-4). He also cited H.H. Risley's vehement opposition and anxiety about "unscrupulous students" misusing records for political propaganda if the archives were opened (p. 94). His analysis pointed towards the use of archival policies as deliberate political technology to control the narrative rather than them being the result of mere administrative caution.

By meticulously tracing the trajectory of setting up the Imperial Record Department (IRD) in 1891, Bhattacharya showed that administrative anxieties, bureaucratic factors and other debates over controlling the narrative and limiting access to information for natives heavily influenced the process. He used a wide array of primary sources: official government records, reports and proceedings, records of IRD and records of archival policies, both published

and unpublished. Furthermore, he used secondary sources to contextualise his findings. He carefully scrutinised the archives, bringing forward the nuances of managing historical records and the intrinsic power dynamics that guided them. He also went on to do a comparative study of the archival policies in Britain and India, pointing towards discrepancies and deliberate underdevelopment in the colony.

In the first half of the book, Bhattacharya describes the fundamental paradox in the colonial impetus that led to the organised archiving of official documents. "The process for establishing archives in India started during the colonial period with the process of dismantling 'useless' records" (p. vii). The colonial rulers saw archives as an instrument of control and intended to use them for administrative utility, rather than facilitating academic or historical research. The need for the destruction of 'useless records' was motivated by financial frugality post the 1857 uprising. There were severe bureaucratic obstructions to the creation of a central "muniment room" which was being advocated by members of the records committee (1861), like Rev. James Long and Wheeler. Senior ICS bureaucrats such as Seton-Karr pushed for decentralised record-keeping across departments, as a centralised system would be expensive and practically inconvenient. It was also argued by Hunter that there was a lack of a "class of men of letters and leisure", "graver researcher" and that Indian writers were more inclined towards press endeavours (p. 21). Public access to records under the bureaucratic control was to be restricted, fearing the anti-imperialistic, mobilising consequences that total transparency might have. Ultimately, in 1865, considering the political and financial advantages, the recommendation for the creation of a central archive was rejected, and replaced with the decision to publish selected documents in order to maintain control over the narrative.

The self-motivated colonial attitude could very well be seen in Bhattacharya's comparative analysis of policies in the metropole and the colony. The underdevelopment of archives in India was deliberate and mirrored the anxieties of administrators stationed in India and their unwillingness to create a system similar to that in their mother country. As Ranke had stated, there was no other country like England that had collected vast amounts of documentary material to construct its history, which was in stark contrast to its own colony (pp. 36-37). The Secretaries of State, who constantly pushed for

a more accessible archive, emulated the Public Record Office in London, established post the enactment of the Public Records Act of 1838. But the ICS bureaucrats in India were reluctant. Bhattacharya states that the public or grammar school-educated civil servants could not see the importance and the political relevance of proper archiving to maintain an image of the Empire, as compared to the State Secretaries educated from esteemed educational institutions. The persistent pressure from London led to the appointment of G.W. Forrest in 1891 as the first record keeper of the Imperial Record Department. Forrest successfully organised the records in Bombay and was determined to create a high-functioning Record Office in the colony.

The book then goes on to encapsulate the functioning of the IRD. The two main motivations of the IRD were: using the archive as an "instrument of governance" on one hand and, on the other hand, it was about dealing with the "ideological issues, maintaining Britain's imperial image and the interpretation of the past of the Indian Empire" (pp. 91-92). The archives provided guidance in the formulation of legal and administrative policies, as well as legitimised them by providing historical records and justifications. In the process of creating an imperial legacy, the IRD published volumes glorifying figures such as Hastings and Cornwallis. The archives were not meant for academic research but for providing a legitimate basis for governance, and the sole reason the imperial rulers spent any money on preserving important documents. But this issue of public access led to a major debate between Viceroy Lord Curzon and Home Secretary H. H. Risley, as Bhattacharya showed (pp. 110-111). The India Office in London was gradually becoming more and more accessible to researchers, and Curzon pushed for the same in India. Upon inquiry, he was informed by the head of the IRD, C.R. Wilson, that there were practically no facilities offered to the public for archival research (pp. 116-117). Curzon's constant efforts were met with vigorous resistance from the bureaucrats, especially H.H. Risley, who was concerned about the misconstruction of historical narrative and its unsolicited usage for political purposes. The restrictions prevailed and were reasserted with the departure of Curzon in 1905.

Again, for the feasibility of the administrators, post 1897, the IRD subsequently went on to produce 'Press Lists' and 'Calendars'. Press lists had an inventory of records, a description of the content and their time periods. For easier

accessibility, the Press Lists became necessary to organise the mammoth mounds of paper. The process of organising was also modified according to time and financial constraints, like shifting to a briefer format, as the detailed format impeded progress. Calendars were a minutely detailed list of documents, and the process was initially carried out at the Indian Office in London, as it was not financially feasible in India. In 1904, the IRD was asked to start the process due to pressure from Curzon, though it was not a successful endeavour. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya suggests that this might have been a calculated political move, fearing that the records may provide nationalist ammunition rather than their claims of inefficiency. He read the IRD's failure to produce English calendars, while successfully calendaring Persian documents, as a deliberate political choice. English calendars would have made records too easily accessible, whereas publishing selected documents allowed the government to maintain control.

Sir William Hunter, too, warned against the "too exclusive use" of archival records as it could "foreshorten the perspective of history" (p. 81). Though for the colonial government, keeping the records objective was never the main goal, controlling the narrative was. Bhattacharya refuses to treat these archival practices as neutral. He raises a pertinent question on how far colonial archiving could be treated as value-free. Which he then answers, citing the debate between Sir James Fitzjames Stephen and Henry Beveridge over the "Nuncomar case" during the governorship of Hastings. While Sir James Fitzjames Stephen talked about how he consulted ample works produced on the Nuncomber case, none were of value. He ruled out the claim of Macaulay that Impey and Hastings worked closely together and were responsible for the "judicial murder" of Maharaja Nanda Kumar (p. 79). While Stephen's account completely exonerated Hastings and Impey, a year later, Beveridge, a member of the radical Positivists' Society of England and of the Indian Civil Service, came out with a counter-account. He used the same records used by Stephen and concluded by condemning Impey and Hastings as complicit in the "judicial murder". Through this debate, it can be understood that interpretation is inseparable from the historian's positionality, as archives do not speak for themselves.

The last chapter details the last two decades of British rule and a few early years post-independence. In 1919, the Indian Historical Records Commission

(IHRC) was set up, which was constituted of eminent historians from India and became a seminal policy-making body, challenging the exclusionary archival policies of the government. Significant changes started coming with the decade-long tedious shift of the IRD from Bengal to Delhi. Bhattacharya identifies 1939-40 as years characterised by "momentous steps" (p. 165). The government of India, for the first time, threw open its records up to the year 1880 to bona fide researchers. The IHRC, transformed from a small official committee to a powerful forum of academic historians, was led by Sir Jadunath Sarkar. It was the cumulative result of constant pressure from the IHRC and the political climate of the time, which pushed for the opening of the archives, rather than it being a sudden concession from the colonial government. Though bureaucrats like A.M.F. Abdul Ali emphatically opposed the IHRC regulations on censoring of notes at that time, regulations on access to fees, and time limits of the records, the Government of India Act of 1935 and the 1937 provincial elections made continued exclusion unsustainable (pp. 163-164).

Bhattacharya also links archival changes to the contemporary geopolitical shifts. According to him, the First World War dealt a decisive blow to Britain's self-confidence as a global power (p. 193). The intellectual transformation produced a new generation of British historians- Edward Thompson, G.T. Garett, L.S.S. O'Malley, and C.F. Andrews, who broke from the "old spirit" of colonial historiography (p. 199). Thompson and Garrett, unlike Vincent Smith or James Mill, acknowledged Indian agency while exploring socio-cultural history and exposed an "informal censorship" distorting British Indian history (p. 200). The process of liberalisation of archival access in 1939-40 was not just a mere isolated administrative reform or concession, but rather a reorientation of colonial attitudes in the face of metropolitan decline and the political climate post the Government of India Act 1935 and the 1937 provincial elections.

This liberalisation had immediate historical consequences, as Bhattacharya notes. Access to the reading room increased drastically, from an average of 39 from 1940-48 to 100 in 1955 (p. 166). While historians like Jadunath Sarkar, who were more inclined towards British ways of historiography, were satisfied with the opening of records till the 1800s, other contemporary historians, such as Nilakanta Sastri, pushed to open records till 1858, to maintain parity with practices in Europe (pp. 158-159). With the opening of the archives, histories

countering colonial narratives with archival evidence began to be written. The archives were now working towards fueling proper research and scholarship, transcending mere imperial impetus. Mediated and scrutinised access was now being provided to non-official researchers, though the anxieties of the officials lingered. The appointment of Surendranath Sen as the Keeper of Records in 1938 marked a transition from archives being imperial instruments to resources for scholarship. He, being a historian himself, wrote a history of 1857 which showed a fundamental departure from the mutiny framework of his predecessor, George Forrest.

Ultimately, the British Raj culminated in the Partition of 1947. In a striking contrast to the earlier years, post-independence, at the first IHRC meeting in 1948, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Abul Kalam Azad, the education minister, addressed the commission. High-ranking officials never bothered to attend these meetings in the earlier decades. Nehru and Azad called for the study of the colonial period "without prejudice or passion" (p. 146). The partition brought forward a major logistical challenge of dividing the records. The book describes the role the IHRC played during the partition. One of its subcommittees made the decision not to divide the records of the Indian Government to maintain the integrity of the records, and decided to send microfilms of it to Pakistan, inviting dissatisfaction. Upon the committee's recommendation, the IRD transitioned into the National Archives of India (NAI) (p. 149). Though this was a step towards decolonising the colonial instrument of control, it left a lingering colonial structure in place. The IHRC made noteworthy efforts in trying to make provinces establish proper record offices and integrate princely states, but their bureaucracies echoed anxieties similar to those of the colonial bureaucrats and resisted access.

Sabyasachi Bhattacharya's book urges the readers to see archives as objects of scrutiny rather than neutral spaces of storage. He emphasises the necessity of reading records "along the grain"[1] to understand them as well as reading them "against the grain"[2] to identify the interplay of power structures that lead to the sustenance of certain historical narratives over others. His work also

[1] Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 53.

[2] Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," trans. Dennis Redmond (2005), thesis VII.

meticulously lays out the manipulation of the colonial authorities and contemporary politics that led to the making and remaking of archival policies. They became sites of contestations and negotiations. The challenges of restricted access under colonialism encapsulated a sense of longing for sovereignty. Though the focus remained on a top-down approach, studying the policy-level deliberations and bureaucratic dilemma, Bhattacharya only touched upon the role of the *munshis* and Indians such as Zail Muhammad or Amjad Hussain, who were also instrumental in the process of archiving.

*Archiving the British Raj* studies the relationship between knowledge production and power and questions the nature of historical evidence. The archival policies, access to records, decision of what was to be preserved and what was to be 'disposed-off' were all structured within a greater political framework of colonial control and power, which this book intricately breaks down with proper archival evidence and detailed explanations. Through his writing, Sabyasachi Bhattacharya draws the reader in and guides them through the contours of the manifold deliberations that shaped archival policies in colonial India and, subsequently, in the nascent independent India.

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# Surinder Singh. *Hir Damodar: Context, Translation and Analysis*. New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2024, pp 386.

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## Hir: A Journey towards *kamil murid*

Hir, a popular character of the Panjabi love legend, is celebrated in numerous poetic renditions. The tale, set in Takhat Hazara, Jhang, and Rangpur Khera, narrates the journey of love, separation, and divine unity. Hir has evolved into a significant protagonist in many academic discourses, ranging from mysticism, representing the voice of the female gender, and a tragic heroine shaped by the social world of medieval Panjab. She is identified with valour, reflecting the sentiments of highest sacrifice.

> *Ser dityan baaj na ishq pakkey.*
>
> Without sacrificing your head, love cannot be fulfilled or perfected.[1]

For others like Amrita Pritam, Hir was a victim of patriarchal oppression and violence.[2]

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**Note on translation and transliteration**: Unless and until stated, all translations and transliterations are by the author. The original Punjabi sources appear in the footnotes.

[1] Waris Shah, *Heer Waris Shah*, ed. Jeet Singh Sital (New Delhi: Navyug Publishers, 1963), 18, stanza 117.

[2] On the victimhood and patriarchy in various retellings of *Hir Ranjha*, see Tanvir Anjum, "The Soul-bride of the Divine-groom: Bridal Metaphor in Sufi Poetry of Shah Husayn," *Journal of Sikh and Punjab Studies* 24, nos. 1–2 (Spring–Fall 2017): 37; Paramjit S. Judge, "Religion and Caste in Eighteenth-Century Punjab: A Sociological Analysis of *Heer* of Waris Shah," in *Reconstructing Identities: Society through Literature*, ed. Paramjit S. Judge and Gurpreet Bal (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2008), 23–40; Ishwar Dayal Gaur, *Society, Religion and Patriarchy: Exploring Medieval Punjab Through Hir Waris* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2009); Sara Kazmi, "Radical Re-tellings of Hir: Gender and the Politics of Voice in Postcolonial Punjabi Poetry," *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* 20 (2019), https://doi.org/10.4000/samaj.5294.

*Ajj aakha'n waris shah nu kito'n qabra'n vicho'n bol.*

Today, I call Waris Shah, speak from inside your grave.[3]

These narrative diversions rest primarily on Waris Shah's *Hir Ranjha,* which was rendered in the mid-eighteenth century and has acquired a significant place in the social and academic imagination. On the other hand, Damodar's narrative appears distant and has not been a subject of serious academic deconstruction and contemplation.

Surinder Singh's work, *Hir Damodar: Context, Translation and Analysis*, overcomes this academic neglect and provides a historical understanding of crucial dimensions of this poetic text, which was first versified in the sixteenth century. This first English translation of Damodar's prose work is bound to yield further research insights from diverse perspectives, both within and outside Panjab. He ensured that the book is not merely a translation but also an analysis of the narration, and deals with events crucial to the making of Hir as an enlightened being (*raushan*). The work is divided into six chapters that collectively trace the idea of love tales or *qissas* to medieval times, the milieu of Damodar in which he wrote the text, and how his successors subsequently rendered it in their own environs. Therefore, Singh doesn't just translate the text; he deconstructs the socio-political world of the sixteenth-century Panjab for his readers.

Singh begins his work with an introduction to 'Erotic Passion in Persia' through the work of *Vis-Ramin* compiled under the Parthians in the third century. He then stretches his canvas and highlights 'Madness in the Arabian Desert' through Nizami Ganjawi's *Laila-Majnun* and underlines 'Prince-Slave tussle in Egypt' in Jami's *Yusuf-Zuliakha*. While tracing the emergence of love legends and their associations with spiritual discourses, it was Amir Khusrau who, while in Multan under the patronage of Prince Muhammad, decided to become the poet of 'tresses and moles' in the late thirteenth century. Later compositions, i.e., *Premakhyan*, drew inspiration from the tradition of these love legends, and the same is reflected in Awadhi writings of Abdul Quddus

[3] Amrita Pritam, *Lamiyaan Vaataan* (Amritsar: Sikh Publishing House Ltd., 1949), 11.

Gangohi's *Chandayan* (late-fifteenth century), Shaikh Qutban Surhawardi's *Mrigawati* (early-sixteenth century), Malik Muhammad Jaisi's *Padmavat* (mid-sixteenth century), and so on.

The second chapter of the book establishes a comprehensive 'Historical Context' for analysing the political transition after the rise and decline of the Tughlaqs. The region witnessed the emergence of a new agrarian social strata as new lands were reclaimed for cultivation. The book, further, details the dissemination of Sufism across the urban landscapes of medieval Panjab, spanning key urban centres such as Lahore, Multan, Uchh, Gujarat, Batala, Jalandhar, Malerkotla, Sindh, Hansi, and Panipat, with its material remains in the form of *dargahs* (saint tombs) and *jamaat-kha'nas* (congregational and devotional space within a *khanqah* complex). The critique of political turmoil post-Timurian invasion, in which 'Qazis and Brahmins ceased to perform their functions, leaving Satan to hold wedding rites', is well attested in the *bani* (verses) of Guru Nanak. As the Guru recorded, "The kings were butchers and fractious like lions" (p. 71). The simultaneous rise of rural ruling elites like the Jatts and the state's aggressive extraction of agricultural surplus made the rural landscape violent, leaving many records of conflicts in contemporary administrative and literary writings. Thus, Damodar's narrative sketched the socio-political landscapes of the landed classes, with a complex interplay of clan alliances, rivalries, matrimonial relations, collective decision-making, and the offering of refuge to the weak as a marker of moral superiority and valour, in contrast to the ruling class of the times.

The story, as Singh argues, is mainly located in rural Panjab, even when its major characters come from the aristocracy. The devotional strains that rejected social ritualisation and inequalities in the face of mystic fervour, as reflected in both Sufi and Sikh philosophy, might have served as a contemporary influence in shaping the poet's understanding of the struggle of Hir-Ranjha. Nevertheless, one would not miss Singh's heavy reliance on *shariat*-based *tasawwuf* (mysticism) in opposition to *beshara,* i.e. beyond the confines of Islamic *shariat.* Various deviant groups like the *Qalandari, Jawaliq, Haidris* and others roamed the rural landscape of Panjab around the same time. These deviant groups rigidly followed *marifat* (gnostic) and rejected *jahl-murakkab* (ignorance owing to the primacy of *nafs* [ego]). In addition to these roots of mystical ideas, the book also unravels the political dynamics of the

sixteenth century through the changing equations within the rural aristocracy. The contestations between agrarian and pastoralism; patriarchal demands over women's autonomy and their resistance; and dogmas vis-à-vis mysticism acted as a stage on which Damodar could weave his narrative. One cannot help but notice traces of similar discussions in earlier works by Surinder Singh, notably in *The Making of Medieval Panjab: Politics, Society and Culture c. 1000-c. 1500.*[4]

The third chapter provides a 'Translation in Prose' of Damodar's work. The author follows a stylistic translation of the work in prose, which enhances the text's openness and conceptual clarity. The transliteration of vernacular words such as *dilasa* (assurance), *heel na hujjat* (no excuse for opposition), *khan ishq di* (a mine of love) preserves the linguistic texture and emotive character of the original Panjabi verse. Furthermore, transliteration is used extensively and remains part of the original text rather than being confined to footnotes, helping the readers to read without structural disruptions. The author then transitions to the fourth chapter, 'Analysis of the Narrative', beginning with the mapping of Damodar's attachment to the Siyal household and the benefaction it provided him. As a trader, he evaluated his rural landscape across the areas of Jhang (under Siyals), Takht Hazara (under Kheras and the homeplace of Ranjha), and Kot Qabula (under the Nahars). Despite his claiming to be an eyewitness to the tale, Damodar confuses the dates of the events. The protagonists of the *qissa* most likely lived during the reign of Behlol Lodhi, not Akbar, whom Damodar refers to seventeen times (p. 243).

Readers will find the author's survey of the migration of Jatts from Sindh to Panjab and the role of popular sacred places in the expansion of agrarian settlements, particularly useful. Singh highlights the significant role *Panj Pir*s (five saint figures) played in guiding the protagonists throughout the narrative. It was their divine intervention which united Hir with Ranjha and protected them from many hardships and attempts on their lives. A section maps the movement of the Siyals, who claimed descent from Punwar Rajputs. They cultivated the land between the rivers Chenab and Jhelum and converted to Islam owing to the inspiration of Baba Farid, a sultanate-era Sufi saint who was the teacher of Nizamuddin Auliya (p. 245).

[4] Surinder Singh, *The Making of Medieval Panjab: Politics, Society and Culture, c. 1000–c. 1500* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributors, 2020).

The work also portrays clan settlements with a chief as "a repository of power, wealth and influence" (p. 247), but not immune to collective decision-making of the other clan members, even in domestic matters like selecting a groom for his daughter. It was perhaps this solidarity among the kindred groups that subsequently converted to the appropriation of zamindari rights by these clans. The work further weaves the strands of deception, "work, sex, spirituality and struggle" (p. 361) into a single thread, contrary to the established early writing on the same genre. For Damodar, ultimate submission reflects the convergence of all human traits. Thus, Damodar's narrative painted a large canvas on which both the elites and the marginalised played their roles; where a forced husband could never match the glory of a lover; and where men and women, even from humble backgrounds, contributed to protecting and helping the divine lovers.

In the next chapter, 'Successors of the Damodar,' the author gestures towards later retellings of the legend; in the writings of Sujan Rai Bhandari, Waris Shah, Ahmad Gujjar, Bulleh Shah, and numerous others. He delineates Waris Shah's mapping of detailed clan structures and social relations, portraying Ranjha as a Mughal zamindar, estranged from his brothers yet affectionate towards his sister-in-law, Lali. R. C. Temple, a colonial folklorist, came across the legend in which Ranjha deceived Gorakhnath, and Raja Adli subjected Hir to oppression. The evolution of the legend from Damodar to R. C. Temple enables readers to trace its transformative phases and the obstacles encountered in the process, thereby allowing them to comprehend the narrative in its multiple dimensions. Singh supplements his work with maps and tables for clarity, while the extensive notes and bibliography encourage further scholarly engagement.

Singh emphasises that Damodar's Hir resonates with mystical traditions such as *wajd*, *wahadat al-wujud*, *nafs*, *pir-murid*, *zikr*, *fana*, *ishq ḥaqiqi*, and *ishq majazi*. For readers, the second, third and fourth chapters serve as the work's epicentre. According to Singh, Damodar knew that Hir was destined to become a *raushan* (enlightened being), as a personification of spiritual excellence (*azmat ki rushnai*), but to reach there, hardships and austerities tested her resolve:

*Hoya hukam hujuro koe, ape baaji pae.*[5]

Look at the power of almighty... In His majesty, He played His own game. (p. 103)

In addition, the author makes the reader acquainted with ideas that, at first, Damodar needed to elevate Hir's character. The original text was shaped by opaque ideas. The reader who might not be well-versed in the original vocabulary, the terminology like *bagga shing* (white tiger) and others, becomes easily comprehensible after going through the book.

Hir betrays the conventional notions of patriarchy. She is a warrior figure and portrays herself as a zamindar like her father and subjugates the entire land (*saari zimin nivai*). No one could do anything without her permission; she came to beat Ranjha when he was sleeping in the bedstead. In his previous works, Singh has very elaborately defined the workings of these clans and termed them as "*vadey rath zimin de khawind* [the lord of the land]" (p. 148). Hir was acting like a clan chief, thus saving Ludan from the Sambal clan and giving him refuge. But as the narrative evolves, this defiant character of Hir transforms into surrender. Singh explains this through Sufi ideas. To attain the stage of *marifa* (gnosis) and become *raushan* (illuminated), one has to leave all the *nafs*, to go in submission, or one would say,

*Hoi khak zimin di loka…ishq machayi matti.*[6]

She became the dust of the earth without a bit of conceit... but love had aroused her intelligence. (p. 130)

Ego shatters, and the *qalb* (repository of knowledge and emotions) awakens when Hir addresses herself as *chakkey nal chaketi* (p. 130). Earlier, she had brought Ranjha to the *chakri* (service), but she finally surrendered herself as Ranjha's servant (*chakkar*). She declared to her mother,

[5] I have referred to Damodar Gulati, *Hir Damodar*, ed. Jagtar Singh (Patiala: Publication Bureau, Punjabi University, 1987) for Punjabi text of the *qissa*.

[6] Ibid.

*Mayein ranjhe di mai roti kiti, chawal main he chilaye, hik jo chawal sahiyan bhanna, Ranjha ann na khaye.*[7]

Ranjha does not eat food if there is a minor lapse. (p. 148)

Singh vividly conveys the transformation of ideas of defiance and courage in the form of *ishq mijazi* (worldly love), which led the seekers to the heights of *haqiqi* (divine love). Hir brought Ranjha to the bedstead and had sexual intercourse with him. Overflowing with a sense of achievement, she made a startling announcement of her transformation. Henceforth, no one should call her Hir, her pride flowing from an elite background, had crumbled (p. 130, 147, 361). Hir's *mijazi* evolved into *haqiqi* when, "she brazenly admitted that he was not only her husband but also her spiritual guide (*kamil murshid*)" (p. 261). Thus, "in the eyes of Damodar, Hir was more than a beloved of Ranjha, along with her pursuit of love and struggle against patriarchy, Damodar has traced her evolution as a saint under the tutelage of Ranjha" (p. 264).

This analysis also lays out the undercurrents of Ranjha's suffering, which also transformed him into a perfect being (*kamil murshid*). Singh explains how Hir was put through a trial, yet she turned it into a divine test to express her love for Ranjha. She refused to marry Sahiba, and when even her brothers attempted to physically coerce her, she dared them not to touch her again because she had already been claimed by Ranjha:

*Mainu hath ranjhete laye.*[8]

Ranjha has touched me with his hands. (p. 151)

Her devotion was so intense that the conspiracies to kill her by her own family remained futile: "poison does not affect those who digest it with the help of perfect love (*kamil ishq*)" (p. 151), and "who are they going to kill? Hassi! It does not matter to me?... how can one die when Dhido is the protector (*sayin*)?" (p. 153). Hir underwent harsh penance and endured utter deprivation for thirty-five months without Ranjha. She sat on a broken stool and a torn mat. Sitting with truth and patience (*sidq saboori*), her decaying body was writhing

[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.

like a fish without water. Even Ramu, the lover of Sehti, lamented, "There is neither a drop of blood nor a bit of flesh on Hir; it is something that cannot be described" (p. 184).

For Damodar, if it was Hir's love that 'aroused her intelligence' (p. 130), her suffering in Rangpur Khera enabled her to experience Ranjha as her lord (*khawind*), food (*tosh),* and longing (*sikk*) (p. 178). Without any mark of caste or lineage, she reduced herself to the service of Ranjha (*chake nal chaketi*) (p. 130). Submitting to her annihilation, i.e. *fanaa,* she desired "to enter the grave, while reciting the name of Ranjha. Just like the love (*preet*) between Dasarth's son and Sita" (p. 182). She attributed Ali's, her father-in-law, lashing out at her, to Ranjha's command. Her tormentors, thus, were none other but his *murshid:* "My spiritual preceptor (*murshid*) is beating me…all this is handiwork of Ranjha. You must know Ranjha is making you do this" (p. 220). Dismantling her *nafs*, she achieved both *wajd* and *wahadat al-wujud,* while witnessing the *jalal* (anger) of Ranjha manifested in the inferno at Kot Qabula. The perfect *murid* and *murshid* met in the end, and Hir becomes *raushan* as claimed by the mysterious black warriors: "Listen, O Hir! Without all this, you would not have become enlightened (*raushan*)" (p. 223).

There is an interesting contrast in the research done on Hir through the works of Damodar and Waris Shah. Scholars like Ishwar Dayal Gaur and Paramjit Singh Judge who relied more heavily on Waris' Hir, led to situate Hir more as a victim; of poisoning resulting in her death and later, on hearing his beloved's demise, the death of Ranjha. Therefore, in Waris Shah's rendition the worldly union between Hir and Ranjha was never achieved; a ground on which both Gaur and Judge construct a victim identity of Hir in the face of patriarchal violence. On the other hand, Damodar's text offers Hir a salvation not after her death but within the worldly realm itself, owning to the grace of her *murshid* Ranjha. Thus, Damodar's Hir is a test of resilience of a *shagird* whereas Waris's narrative is a tragedy which dwells more on the spiritual merit gained in afterlife, in face of a hostile world.

To conclude, the book remains relevant both for general readers and serious scholars of mysticism and the medieval socio-political milieu. While laying out answers to the question of medieval Panjabi society, the book fills many gaps that kept contemporary writing partitioned into neat boundaries of politics,

literature and mysticism. For Singh, Damodar's Hir is both a spiritual quest of a *murshid* and a story of power among clans settling in different regions of medieval Panjab. It hints at the defiance of Hir, amidst socio-religious pressures which conspired to coerce her into obedience. Thus, the book covers all significant aspects of medieval Panjabi society. This work is sure to leave readers content and experience the ultimate bliss of the *qissa* of Hir Ranjha, with all its trials and tribulations.

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# Tyler W. Williams. *If All the World Were Paper: A History of Writing in Hindi*. New Delhi: Speaking Tiger Books, 2025, pp 336.

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The development of the Hindi language and its literature from the fourteenth century to the late eighteenth century has been examined through a number of contexts by various scholars. Tyler Williams has done this by reconstructing 'scenes' in which artefacts, texts, and practices can be seen as historical wholes, and by analysing material artefacts of manuscript culture that are still available to us in abundance. He argues for understanding the history of Hindi literature, beginning with a manuscript archive rather than a modern, nationalistic canon and for venerating only the elite stalwarts or "father figures" (pp. 2, 215) of the literature. This is due to several factors, including the fact that early Hindi was produced in a variety of socio-historical contexts (monasteries, courts, markets, and households) and the varied physical forms in which manuscripts were produced. For Williams, the primary figures in his narration of this history are the anonymous copyists, copyeditors, notetakers, and disciples who believed the material was worth preserving.

The book's overarching research inquiry focuses upon three questions: who wrote the first vernacular document, the nature of their intent, and who the intended audience for the document was; how did scribes during the course of written history develop a set of conventions for writing (in both style and form) in Hindi, and how were those conventions implemented in practice; and what influences does cultural ideology concerning the nature and the function of writing have upon the development of genres and upon the materiality of printed books?

The primary aim of the book is to explore, not just 'what the texts say,' but how writing as inscription and book-making helped in the development of a 'vernacular' and the embodied character of reading, which has always been

shaped by how it is physically represented (size/form/appearance of books, posture, light/space). A major emphasis has been made on the acknowledgement and examination of handwritten books as "things" (pp. xvi-xx). They are agents in and of themselves, influencing and reacting to human behaviours and perceptions rather than being "objects" upon which human subjects act (p. xvi). This reminded the reviewer instantly of Giorgio Riello's argument that material artefacts are agents in themselves and have been seen as mobile as people.[1] Williams employs the theories of various scholars (Latour/thing theory, McLuhan, Walter Ong, Deibert) to support his idea that the different forms of material culture, i.e., media via material culture (things), will provide a different way to think about the epistemology of society and that books can act as "things" with agency in social life (pp. xvi-xxi, 85).

Beginning with a succinct Introduction that delineates the historiography and his understanding of vernacularisation and his plan of a distinct way to write the history of 'Hindi' through an approach of 'material turn', the book is organised into four chapters that each stage a different ecology of vernacular writing: Sufi-tinged epic romances (*premākhyān*/*pem-kathā*) in sultanate-era courtly milieus; notebooks (*guṭkā*) of *nirguṇ bhakti* singers that blur 'oral' and 'written'; scholastic *pothī* culture among monk-scholars; and the consolidation of vernacular scripture through anthological Sikh 'holy books' (*vāṇī*/*granth*). In return to discussing archives in the Conclusion, Williams raises doubts about the use of collecting, organising, and classifying archival materials by way of their differences (language, genre, religion, region), rather than establishing connections or a shared relational commonality.

In the first chapter, the author shows how the compilation of manuscript forms for *premākhyān* prompted the creation of new styles in the formatting of a manuscript. For instance, a couplet consisting of two shorter lines would be placed vertically in a box, while those containing one longer line would be placed horizontally in a rhombus-shaped format. Conversely, when constructing an acceptably formatted piece of written work in a more standard line-by-line vertical configuration, it would appear as if all of the written content had been created as an original batch. The visuals utilised in these manuscripts provide a means to depict romantic relationships as they

[1] Giorgio Riello, "The 'Material Turn' in World and Global History," *Journal of World History* 33, no. 2 (2022): 193.

developed over centuries. To illustrate this point, Williams reviews a seventeenth-century *Nal Daman* manuscript by scribe Babullah, commissioned by Dilir Khan, a noble patron at Bijapur's royal court. In addition, he demonstrates that the large number of book artists, poets, calligraphers, as well as binders and other craftsmen, along with the formation of many central book-making centres by these Mughal, Deccan and Rajput royal patrons, legitimised and promoted a courtly culture which encouraged books to be produced in the vernacular and read and written about on an increasing basis.

The second chapter examines the outcomes of the extension of the vernacular in common households, which led to the rise of an entirely new form of literature: devotional notebooks, also known as *guṭkā*. Both householders and monk-scholars from Hindu, Jain and Sikh sects created *guṭkās* written in Kaithi (for hymns and narratives) and Nāgari (for *mantrās*, spells, and astrological notes) to use as memory aids. The frequency of shorthand notation, musical notation and creative line breaks seen in the manuscripts suggests that *guṭkā* primarily served as textual devices for oral performances within the vernacular public. As the manuscript culture of non-elite literate persons, other than traditional elites, expanded, one could also see a similar change in the social structure of the Persianate sphere. There is evidence that Khatri and Kayastha scribes, who were formerly commercial and record-keeping Hindu communities, became proficient in writing in Persian and were therefore in such great demand to serve as *munshis* (secretaries) for the Mughal Empire and, subsequently, the British East India Company.[2]

This chapter presents an argument supporting that practicing *guṭkā* writing and transcription shows us that most authors did not interpret *bhakti* (devotion) as a theological doctrine but rather as an established and popular oral performance tradition – that the basis upon which they determined what content to create was solely based on their individual aesthetic responses and/or emotional relationships to that content; and not through adherence to any defined philosophical or religious doctrine. In a close analysis of a seventeenth-century *guṭkā* by a *nirguṇ bhagat*, Williams uses a variety of songs by Kabir, verses attributed to Haridas Niranjani, the epic poem of Dhola Maru, and numerous Jain hymns by Parshvanath to demonstrate the content's

[2] Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Making of a Munshi," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 24, no.2 (2004): 61-72.

diversity. His findings run counter to earlier histories that present the performative oral tradition found in the *guṭkā* as a means of rejecting reading/writing during the medieval *bhakti* movement.

The third chapter discusses *pothī*, an organised compilation of either individual scholarly works or long-form writing in *bhāṣā*; *pothīs* could be found at pedagogical institutions such as *maṭhās* (sectarian monasteries) and *pāṭhśālās* (schools). A *pothī* was a paper version of the unbound palm-leaf book that was prepared by wrapping each leaf with cloth. Each *pothī* contained one complete, self-sufficient, and self-contained work that a member of an imaginary reader community could read independently of other members of that community. However, no two *pothīs* were bound together; thus, *pothīs* would generally be read aloud. The legacy of Sanskrit *pothīs* as associated with poetry (*kāvya*) and prose (*śāstra*) was incorporated into vernacular writing, combined with the use of paper, and provided for experimentation and hybridisation within text form. As a result of paper *pothīs* being written and copied during the early modern period, there was a significant accumulation of a commonly-used collection made up of devotional, educational, and artistic works shared between people and communities composing the Mughal and Rajput courts; religious *maṭhās* and temples, in addition to *pāṭhśālās*; and neighbourhood fairs and festivals.

The last chapter focuses on a specific period in history (the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries) where a new genre of sacred literature (the *vāṇī*/*granth*) emerged as an object of material authority through which religious communities could create and develop their own form of sovereignty. The establishment of a *vāṇī*/*granth* in the form of bound codex required a specific framework and organisation of the manuscript to be developed based on a defined set of rules regarding its inscription and transmission, as well as how to frame the text through its introductory and concluding verses; what was required to structure the *vāṇī*/*granth* into sections; how to properly represent individual saints, their texts, and the contents of their works; etc. Religious communities, e.g., the Sikhs, Dadu Panthis, and Niranjani Sampraday, would collaborate to develop a shared process for creating/distributing a final canon of songs, teachings, and biographical accounts of cherished saint-poets into a defined scripture corpus. Collectively, the *vāṇī*/*granth* represents the material embodiment of the words of the *guru* as a singular unit of scripture. The

contents of each *vāṇī*/*granth* are presented in a unique writing system called Gurmukhi (literal meaning from the mouth of the *guru*) and thus signify that scripture has been elevated to the status of a *guru* and that the religious community recognises the authority of this united scripture as the sovereign authority of their religious polity.

Arguing against a uniform established model to understand the process of 'vernacularisation', Williams believes that this process in North India cannot be understood as a simple top-down (courtly patronage) or bottom-up (popular devotional) story (p. 3). This reviewer particularly likes how the author disagrees with Sheldon Pollock on the development of vernacular literature. According to Pollock, the vernacular was initially utilised for documentary purposes by courtly elites. Later for literary ones[3], but Williams argues that the history of evolution from vernacular to standard Hindi writing is much more chaotic. There were continual interactions between the various privileged and mundane forms of writing and writing technologies (pp. 8-9). Many monks, merchants, clerks, *gurus*, princes, and poets working in diverse sites made this possible. For the author, the innovation of genres and the different kinds of book-forms were especially important in the vernacular contexts. Even the advent of paper and the associated revolution in textual culture seems problematic to the author, as there was a slower, uneven adoption of paper and a continued imitation of palm-leaf conventions in 'cosmopolitan' traditions.

By contrasting different scholarly treatments of vernacularisation, the book simultaneously establishes a basis for both critiques and triumphalism regarding this process. Christian Lee Novetzke's work on the vernacular public sphere provides a different set of lenses through which to examine the process. For Novetzke, the political agents that drove vernacularisation as a historical process were, in fact, 'non-elites' who wrote outside the traditional centres of written literary production (royal courts) and the established aesthetic domain of Sanskrit. It is the strategic organisation of the topos of the everyday in a social, political, artistic, linguistic, and cultural context, where the quotidian, at the centre of the public culture of a given region, will expand

[3] Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 3-5, 75-89.

over time.[4] In her works centred on north India, Francesca Orsini rejected the term "vernacular", arguing that the literary culture of this area was, in a sense, "always already" multilingual.[5]

The author's intervention in this debate is based on his belief that poets writing during this time did not see *kāvya* as having just one *bhāṣā,* that is, one language among equals. In drawing from Andrew Ollett's 'Language Order' framework,[6] Williams similarly imagined a hierarchical language order of Hindi (p. 61). When established poets of *bhāṣā* were considering where their work fit among previously established literatures (the work of established poets in Sanskrit, Prakrit, or Apabhramsha), they believed that the literature (and in some cases the intellectual and/or the religious literature) found in Sanskrit, Prakrit, or Apabhramsha had greater potential as literary works than the literature found in *bhāṣā*. Both the intellectual work that poets, *gurus*, or preachers needed to establish *bhāṣā* as a literary and intellectual vehicle, along with the physical work that authors did to create works in *bhāṣā*, were required.

The contrasting trajectories of early modern knowledge production reveal a deep divide between literary and scientific textual cultures. Sheldon Pollock provides a critical contrast to Williams' narrative of vernacular by examining the persistence of Sanskrit. While expressive and religious literature were both able to vernacularise, Pollock shows that scientific and systematic knowledge (*śāstra*) remained locked into cosmopolitan languages such as Sanskrit because of their strict ideologies regarding language.[7] Thus, the newly emerging bottom-up paper culture of early modernity that Williams celebrates as part of the success of the vernacular had a very limited epistemic range, where it pertained to the formal early modern scientific disciplines.

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[4] Christian Lee Novetzke, *The Quotidian Revolution: Vernacularization, Religion, and the Premodern Public Sphere in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 10.

[5] Francesca Orsini, "How to Do Multilingual Literary History?", *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 49, no. 2 (2012) 225-46; Idem, "Vernacular: Flawed but Necessary?" *South Asian Review* 41, no. 2 (2020): 1-3.

[6] Andrew Ollett, *Language of the Snakes: Prakrit, Sanskrit, and the Language Order of Premodern India* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 3-5.

[7] Sheldon Pollock, "The Languages of Science in Early Modern India," in *Forms of Knowledge in Early Modern Asia: Explorations in the Intellectual History of India and Tibet, 1500–1800*, ed. Sheldon Pollock (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 19-48.

Unlike 'cosmopolitan' languages, the *bhāṣā* placed no value on pure language from a vocabulary or formal standpoint, nor did it create formal rules or a system of authority to delineate what constituted the "rules" (p. 12) of the language. As Williams argues, conversely, there were many who read *bhāṣā* literature and tended to consider local or rustic qualities as one of the essential characteristics of this language. Because of their notion of rusticity, they produced *bhāṣā* literary works utilising grammatical structures that were not rigidly defined or constructed using hybrid vocabulary derived from several languages, i.e., Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Sanskrit, and Prakrit, along with any number of indigenous and tribal languages. This resulted in increased grammatical flexibility and creativity in the production of grammatical rules for *bhāṣā* and the creation of hybrid vocabulary used in *bhāṣā* writing (p. 12).

When diving into the author's perspective on the language 'Hindi', he sees it as a trans-regional literary language, not as language referred to by some as *khaṛī bolī* and written in *Devanāgarī* script as per modern standards, but rather as an approximate standard of a vernacular that had been utilised over various regions as a medium for scholarship and writing in verse; so whether one was sitting in Lahore or Golconda, one would understand the literary and scholarly composition easily. Williams refers to 'Hindi' as not being a single region-specific native tongue, but rather a "link-language" (p. 6); "cosmopolitan vernacular" in Pollock's terminology.[8] During his research, Williams has observed and examined numerous manuscripts and anthologies of works that were probably included within the definition of the *bhāṣā* during their period of composition but are now identified as belonging to a variety of locally defined linguistic frameworks (e.g., Gujarati, Punjabi, Rajasthani). His study included Hindi manuscripts written in various scripts like Gurmukhi (which is now generally accepted as the language of the Punjabi-speaking people), Arabic (which is now usually identified as Urdu), and Kaithi or Mahājani. Many speakers of modern standardised Hindi could find such a backward stretch by the author to be anachronistic, but from the text, it seems that the question of 'What is Hindi and what is not?' is banal and redundant for the author.

[8] Sheldon Pollock, "The Cosmopolitan Vernacular," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 57, no. 1 (1998): 6– 37.

The author further argues that "materiality matters but so does culture" (p. 10). Cultural institutions influence whether or to what extent the materiality of a book technology provides the possibility for a practice to exist. One sees this most directly in the author's treatment of *nirguṇ bhakti*. The conventional scholarship assumes that there is an anti-writing ethos among *nirguṇ bhakti* saints and followers. However, Williams suggests that the construction of the idea of saintly illiteracy (like in the case of Kabir) and the criticisms of mere book-learning (from the *nirguṇ* perspective) are an inherent part of developing the authority of a particular *bhakti* saint, while practitioners of *nirguṇ bhakti* produced many manuscripts (including notebooks, anthologies, liturgical objects, etc.). Another paradigm to look into this is to understand Jon Keune's criticism against modern scholars, who commonly misread the *bhakti* hagiography dualisms (the "language conflict" between orthodox Sanskrit Brahmins versus vernacular reformers) as being substantive, when in fact these expressions are stylised "performative identities" used to express allegiance to a multifaceted public, while at the same time obscuring far more complicated socio-political conditions.[9] This fits with Williams's argument that the notion of an "illiterate" (p. 85, 86, 219) *nirguṇ* saint is equally a constructed hermeneutic device within that tradition rather than an actual historical occurrence.

An important contribution consists of methodology: the book intentionally incorporates close readings of texts, close observations of artefacts, and distant readings/quantitative analytics to make large-scale trends apparent through not merely 'testing hypotheses,' which can be subjectively favoured due to previous experiences, establishing a bias towards genre/sect. The text further serves as an intervention into "creating an archive for Hindi" (pp. 205-27) by critiquing how recent agencies and textual scholars have treated the pre-colonial regnum to create 'manuscripts' (i.e., rudimentary versions of original texts for reproduction in actual original editions of a series), thereby often obscuring the lives of books as used objects and flattening their heterogeneity (pp. 12-14). This makes his work contribute to the further development of approaches in the growing field of book history.

[9] Jon Keune, "Eknāth in Context: The Literary, Social, and Political Milieus of an Early Modern Saint-Poet," *South Asian History and Culture* 6, no. 1 (2015): 79.

Although the chapters consider how specific text-based artefacts (e.g., illustrated codices, portable books, scholastic *pothīs*, monumental scripture and anthologies) contributed to the development of certain practices associated with reading, singing or teaching, the reverse is also true, that the designs of text-based artefacts influenced the development of their associated practices. The author investigates the factors contributing to the various communities within the long seventeenth century, developing a "scriptural turn," (pp. 160-66) and, with regard to the materiality of books, the author provides definitions of processes he terms "literization" and "anthologization," (p. 158) which were factors contributing to vernacular orality being converted into final, discrete collections that were considered to have final authority. Through a series of rites centred around the sacred book, new ways of imagining communities were made possible by the materialisation of saintly words in the shape of a book (p. 159). Finally, the conclusion offers institutional and epistemological considerations regarding how colonial and modern archives, museums, and printed texts (philology) transformed precolonial records and contributed to the current popular view of manuscripts as being "useless" (pp. xvii, 205), which compromises the future of manuscripts as historical records.

A sense of interiority and exclusiveness could be seen in the early modern *guṭkās.* No embellishment marks are evident on the *guṭkās*; this indicates that they were created for personal use and not intended for dissemination. There is no identifiable style of punctuation or markers shown through the use of poetic refrain due to the fact that these notebooks have been made for private purposes and were not meant for reading by a large audience. As Jack Goody[10] has persuasively shown that the advent of modernity, which included embedded individuality, existed elsewhere in equal measure apart from Europe, and recently, Shayan Rajani[11] demonstrated this in the case of Babur's autobiographical account, this reviewer stretches this idea to the functionality of such *guṭkās* as well.

[10] Jack Goody, *The East in the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[11] Shayan Rajani, *Leaving Legacies: The Individual in Early Modern South Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024), 26-29.

This book directly applies the connected-history framework of Subrahmanyam[12] to South Asian textuality by demonstrating that Hindi manuscript culture was a deeply connected, trans-regional ecology rather than a bounded local identity. Furthermore, these notebooks were designed to facilitate the transport of the product. These were designed for easy transportation due to their compact size and sturdy construction. These notebooks also demonstrate another means of facilitating transportation, as they were not exclusively designed to represent any single poet's work. They are also all-inclusive, meaning there is no identifying characteristic which separates the expression of *nirguna* and *saguna* (a religious tradition relating to the idea of God being represented by specific images or names and/or by lack of representation) in the poet's works. For example, one 17th-century *guṭkā* contains contributions by both Kabir and Tulsidas, who represented two different types of expression, *nirguna* and *saguna*, respectively (p. 98).

Readers of the book may ask some new questions related to research, such as: To what extent did gender play a role in each group's ability to gain access to notebooks, *pothīs*, or scriptural codices? How did different types of scribal labour, including patronage and "vocational literacy" (pp. 123-126, 144, 167-170), vary based on caste or class status, and how did this vary across locations outside the geographical areas covered by the book? Finally, how do we create an institutional framework to develop archival practices to catalogue, conserve, and digitise manuscripts as complex, multifaceted book-objects, instead of simply as places to keep 'text' that can be extracted?

On the other hand, the author states that the book is fairly hesitant about its limitations and scope. He states that his sample size is small, and he also states that an overall estimate of the size of the Hindi manuscript archive as a whole will take a long time to complete, if not impossible. Many of the author's broader claims remain provisional due to the nature of the sample being too limited to support strong statistical analysis. He has also placed a limitation on the possible number of manuscripts written by Jains due to the significant differences in language and ideology from Hindi language manuscripts. The use of the word 'scripture' for the texts of different sects of premodern South

[12] Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Connected Histories: Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia," *Modern Asian Studies* 31, no. 3 (1997): 735–62.

Asia seems somewhat inappropriate for polytheistic traditions, unlike the monolithic monotheistic Abrahamic religions.

Overall, the book does an excellent job of using manuscript materiality to change what is considered evidence for both literary and religious history. The practices of reading and writing are not just abstract acts but are shaped by the way people use their bodies to interact with these manuscripts (p. 10). The number of manuscripts used to support this book is large, about 500 manuscripts from various archives, libraries, and collections, and the author has done long-term field research in all these places. The conceptual framework is used carefully as well. There is no quick answer to how technology shapes culture in a general sense; however, the author believes that changes in media occur at the intersection of literary, intellectual, and material cultures. The significance of the form of the original manuscript for its interpretation is effectively established in the book. For example, the author demonstrates how a notebook can be used like a portable performance machine for singers and preachers, and how the codices created by the scholars use colophons and copying-as-service to demonstrate the institution's relation to its patrons. Finally, the scriptural anthologies are found to give authority and value to themselves by maintaining or even replacing the physical presence of the *guru*.

The early modern Hindi presented in this book is revealed not as a proto-national language but as a cross-confessional manuscript ecology that is fluid in mobility, thereby offering readers a means of re-examining 'literature', 'religion', and 'region' through the messy, lived entanglements between scribes, merchants, monks, and texts within Northern India.

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# Sugata Ray. *Climate Change and the Art of Devotion: Geoaesthetics in the Land of Krishna, 1550–1850*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019, pp 294.

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Sugata Ray, in his book '*Climate Change and the Art of Devotion: Geoaesthetics in the Land of Krishna 1550-1850*', provides an interdisciplinary study of the interrelation between environmental changes and artistic productions in the sacred landscape of Braj. Through his extensive study of Braj, a region associated with the playfulness of Krishna, Sugata explores the interconnections between devotional culture, visual culture, and environmental change over the period of three hundred years, between 1550 and 1850. For his wide-ranging archival research and field studies carried out in Mathura and Vrindavan, Sugata combined texts, architecture, illustrated manuscripts, and photographs. In this respect, Sugata also situates art history within a broader environmental context, following the *longue durée* approach of Braudelian history.

As Ray has argued, in addition to the Gaudiya and Pushtimargis, several other Vaishnava sects thrived in Braj in the 16th century. Despite their differences, largely all forms of Vaishnavism in Braj highlighted the significance of the topography of the region as essential to the liturgy of devotion. In this way, its natural environment was accorded liturgical significance similar to that of the complex rituals of eye worship. This liturgy of place was realised, according to Ray, in the monsoon failures of the Little Ice Age,[1] and thus this book explores artistic and architectural practices that were created as a result of

[1] "In the 1970s, climatologists, geographers, and glaciologists contended that the climatic epoch of the Little Ice Age should more appropriately designate the period between 1550 and 1850, when mountain glaciers expanded to their greatest extent in response to diminishing solar output, changes in atmospheric circulation, and massive volcanic activity after the Medieval Warm Period (ca. 900–1300 CE)." Ray, *Climate Change and the Art of Devotion*, 14.

human engagement with geographical, geological, botanical, zoological, mineralogical, astronomical, and climatic formations. From the illustrated manuscripts of the 16th century to the architecture of the nineteenth century, the book narrates the significant events of artistic and architectural innovations in Braj.

In chapter one, Sugata Ray talks about the idea of hydroaesthetics to discuss how art practices, religious culture, and environmental changes overlapped in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Braj. Starting with illustrated manuscripts such as the *Isarda Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (c. 1560–70), Ray discusses how the river Yamuna became central, and artists came to emphasise the river in pictorial space. While in earlier illustrated manuscripts, such as the *Palam Bhāgavata* (c. 1520–40), the Yamuna had served as a background element, in the Isarda paintings (c. 1560-70), the Yamuna comes to dominate the pictorial space through dynamic diagonals, fluid lines, and expansive spatial arrangements. While art history has traditionally seen the introduction of these stylistic elements in the art of Braj as being linked to Mughal paintings, Ray suggests that they need to be seen in relation to environmental and theological changes. The chapter places this transformation of art within the larger historical context of the Little Ice Age, marked by repeated droughts and failed monsoons that devastated north India during that time. Historical records from that time reveal severe famines and other ecological disasters in the mid-sixteenth century, which might have added to the cultural and symbolic importance of water. Hence, as Ray argues, this focus on rivers might have been informed by the larger historical experience of water scarcity.

Essential to this transformation has also been the appearance of new Vaishnava devotional theologies that stress the sacred presence of Krishna within the natural world. Associated with the reformers Vallabha and the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition, the Yamuna was not only seen as a physical entity, but also as the very manifestation of Krishna, represented as a form of Krishna's love. Hence, paintings like those contained within the Isarda manuscript portray the river as part of a larger ecosystem, blending the natural world with devotional art forms, as described by Ray, who refers to this as "non-anthropomorphic hydrolatry" (p. 45), where the very act of beholding the river constitutes a theological experience. Ray extends this discussion to the architecture and the riverfront ghats in Mathura. For example, both the

Sati Burj (built in the sixteenth century) and the Torana (built in the seventeenth century) at Vishram Ghat created a space for viewing the river.

In chapter two, Ray examines the close relationship between land, devotion, and art in the Braj region, focusing on Govardhan Hill as a geological feature and a sacred body in Vaishnava thought. The author first examines mythological narratives from the Vishnu Purana and Harivamsa that describe the event in which Krishna raised Govardhan Hill to protect the people of Braj from a destructive storm sent by the Vedic god Indra. Rather than simply accepting this mythological account, Ray argues that this event can also be seen as an early expression of a theological ecology in which land plays a central role, and thus, cannot be separated from the divine. In this way, Govardhan Hill emerged not just as a land but as a physical form of Krishna. Further, the author examined how this religious understanding of land was expressed in the early artistic representations of Krishna lifting Govardhan Hill. This underwent a major change in the sixteenth century with the advent of devotional movements associated with Chaitanya and Vallabhacharya. Their followers placed great emphasis on the physical landscape of Braj, which they believed represented the presence of Krishna, and hence they promoted pilgrimage practices, in which rocks, hills, and forests were considered sacred relics. A section of the chapter also discusses the sixteenth-century Govind Dev Temple in Vrindavan, and as in the temple's architectural design, there is a unique lintel that depicts Krishna lifting Govardhan, which was placed over the entrance. In this way, the temple architecturally relocates the sacred hill within its own body, becoming a spatial retelling of the *Govardhan Leela.*

In chapter 3, the author explores the history of forests in Braj and how they are represented in devotional literature, paintings, and architecture. After exploring Mughal chronicles, European travel writings, administrative documents, and Vaishnava texts, the author offers a history of the representation of forests in the art of Braj. Until the seventeenth century, forests in the area around Mathura were full of wildlife such as lions, gazelles, and other animals, where Mughal emperors like Akbar, Jahangir, and Shah Jahan hunted. However, by the eighteenth century, rapid agricultural expansion, rising land prices, and urbanisation had converted much of this forested landscape into agricultural land. In this context, the basic premise of this chapter is that the imagination of Braj did not simply reflect ecological

realities but creatively reworked them, as well. In fact, Vaishnava texts of the medieval period conceptualised Braj in terms of ecologies such as *vana* (forest woodlands) and *jangala* (p. 99). However, by the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, devotees increasingly conceptualised Braj in terms of *kunja* (p. 99), dense thickets of vines and creepers that provided the setting for the divine love of Radha and Krishna. This is interesting since this conceptualisation occurred at a time when real forests were being destroyed.

The author traces the manner in which this change greatly affected and changed visual culture. Eighteenth-century paintings by the Kishangarh artist Nihalchand show Vrindavan as an intensely lush and enclosed bower, filled with thick foliage and flowers. These paintings focus on what the author calls "vegetal aesthetics" (p. 101), in which plants and trees are active participants in devotional narratives. The theological basis for this can be seen in Vaishnava scriptures like the Bhagavata Purana, wherein trees and vines in Braj are described as beings that are emotionally attached to Krishna and his presence. Further, Ray talks about how architecture also shows how this visual culture was affected by the concept of this vegetal world. Ray gave the example of Gangamohan Kunj in Vrindavan, which featured floral carvings, jasmine motifs, and courtyards filled with dense bowers, where worship became an embodied sensory experience. The author argues that this architectural strategy was one of the reactions to ecological change, wherein forests gave way to the creation of sacred bowers within temples and gardens like Seva Kunj. Significantly, the chapter also locates these developments in relation to global processes and trends. The eighteenth century was an important period in the history of botanical science and plant classification systems. The devotional ecologies of Braj, however, were governed by a logic completely different from those systems and were, instead, driven by ritualism, poetry, and emotional relationships with nature and plant species.

The fourth chapter deals with the construction of the Shahji Temple by the merchant and patron Shah Kundanlal, and Ray analyses this temple as a religious architecture constructed in the context of colonial modernity. It was constructed in 1868 along the banks of the Yamuna, at a time when Braj had already become part of the British Empire with the establishment of the Mathura District in 1832. What is most relevant in this chapter is the idea of ether or *ākāśa* (p. 134), which is discussed in the context of its use in the creation

of religious architecture. In Vaishnava philosophy, ether is the fundamental form of matter through which sound is transmitted. The author argues that Kundanlal had attempted to translate this philosophical idea into architectural and visual forms. The iconography of the temple, filled with depictions of musicians, dancers, and people responding to the music of devotion, is seen as an attempt at visualising sound in a way that had never been done before in the religious architecture of Braj. From an architectural point of view, it combines elements of European neoclassicism, such as the pedimented façade[2], Solomonic columns, and hexastyle portico, which were characteristic of colonial architecture in cities such as Calcutta and Bombay. However, these have been adapted in the context of Mughal *chattris*, projecting eaves, and other elements inspired by Awadhi architecture, too. It seems that Kundanlal has successfully developed a form of Vaishnava cosmopolitanism which was worldly and spiritual. Colonial officials, including Mathura collector Frederic S. Growse, criticised the eclectic appropriation of European styles, indicating the tension between imperial power and indigenous architectural experimentation.

Additionally, elaborate fountains, marble water channels, and polished surfaces brought water from the Yamuna River into the temple, generating a multisensory environment where sound, water, and light came together as a single entity. The image of music is carried into the interior of the temple, where pietra dura panels show *sakhis*, female companions of Radha and Krishna, engaged in music, dance, and other artistic activities. These figures also indicate the patron's own religious practice, as Kundanlal took on the poetic identity of Lalita, a female attendant of Krishna. The emphasis of this chapter on gendered devotion, sonic aesthetics, and architectural hybridity reveals that Shahji Temple was a response to colonial modernity. Instead of conforming to hyper-masculine norms promoted by colonial and nationalist discourses, Kundanlal's temple celebrated the feminised devotion of the *sakhis*. *Climate Change and the Art of Devotion* is a noteworthy work in the study of Braj, early modern South Asian art history, and environmental history. Sugata Ray shows how artistic practices, religious traditions, and environmental changes were intensely linked in shaping the sacred topography of Braj from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. By using the basic elements of water, land,

[2] A triangular front design, inspired from classical Greek and Roman architecture.

forest, and ether as frameworks for organising this book, the author demonstrates how natural formations were not just passive backdrops for religious life but also played an active role in shaping religious culture. One of the greatest strengths of this book is its methodology, for which Ray used an interdisciplinary approach by combining illuminated manuscripts, architectural styles in temples, and paintings, in addition to textual evidence, archival records, and environmental history. His extensive fieldwork in Mathura and Vrindavan, along with his use of numerous photographs, allows the reader to visualise the geography discussed in the book.

This book also engages with some historiographical traditions in its concern for long-term environmental changes and their interrelation with cultural production, thus aligning itself with the longue durée approach developed by the French historian Fernand Braudel. However, while Braudel focused on macro-history, Ray moves beyond this approach by emphasising localised devotional practices, aesthetics, and the experiences of pilgrims, artists, and patrons. Overall, this book reinterprets the sacred landscape while problematising the boundaries between nature, art, and religion. It demonstrates that the sacred landscape of Braj was continuously shaped by climate change, theology, and artistic production. To conclude, this book is an important and innovative contribution to the historiography of South Asia and debates on the interrelation between environment and culture.

# Mika Natif. *Mughal Occidentalism: Artistic Encounters between Europe and Asia at the Courts of India, 1580-1630.* Leiden: Brill, 2018, pp 310.

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Mika Natif's monograph *Mughal Occidentalism: Artistic Encounters Between Europe & Asia at the Courts of India, 1580 -1630,* deals with the cross-cultural encounters and exchanges that took place in the visual realm between the Mughal Court and Europe, thus effectively combining the study of the history of art with its circulation. Natif's use of novel and varied methodologies of art-historical analysis aims to reorient the pre-existing debates surrounding these complex artistic encounters by highlighting how European elements were repurposed by Mughal artists to create a sophisticated visual language (p. 2).

Natif finds herself in conversation with a plethora of scholarly works by art historians on the issue of such encounters during the early modern period. Early scholars like Milo C. Beach and Stuart Welch view the Mughal paintings as derivatives or copies dependent on passive imports and acquisitions, thus placing the European paintings on a pedestal and threatening to take away agency from the Mughal artists.[1] Ebba Koch also describes the encounter as "European influence" but departs by arguing against passive receptivity and in favour of a deliberate Mughal ideological programme of self-representation.[2]

[1] See Milo Cleveland Beach, *The Grand Mogul: Imperial Painting in India, 1600–1660* (Williamstown, MA: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1978), 56. Milo Cleveland Beach, "The Mughal Painter Kesu Dās," *Archives of Asian Art* 30 (1976): 36–37. Also see Stuart Cary Welch, *India, Art and Culture, 1300–1900* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1985), 164.

[2] See Ebba Koch, "The Influence of the Jesuit Mission on Symbolic Representations of the Mughal Emperors," in *Mughal Art and Imperial Ideology: Collected Essays* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 11. Also see Ebba Koch, "The Mughal Emperor as Solomon, Majnun, and Orpheus, or The Album as a Think Tank for Allegory," *Muqarnas* 27 (2010): 277.

Natif, in line with the recent works of Gauvin Bailey,[3] Sanjay Subrahmanyam,[4] Gregory Minissale,[5] and Kavita Singh,[6] condemn this approach as Eurocentric as it views the encounter as one between an active 'influencer' which leaves the party being 'influenced' as passive, thereby deeming the process hierarchal (p. 10). Natif goes beyond the unidirectional and influence-based conception and talks about theories of cross-cultural image use, give and take between Europe and Mughal courts, and emphasises the philosophical reasonings behind the use of specific iconography.

She relies on analysis of the illustrations found in the folios of the Gulshan Album, Nizami's *Khamsa*, Saʿdi's *Kulliyat,* alongside a critical reading of the primary Persian chronicles, literary and philosophical sources such as Abu'l Fazl's *Ain-i Akbari*, Jahangir's *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri* and Tusi's *Akhlaq-i Nasiri,* inscriptions on and around the paintings, as well as letters written by the Jesuit missionaries at the Mughal court. She opts for such a methodological approach in order to show how the Mughal corpus demonstrates its logical selection and transformation of European norms in the Mughal context rather than as a

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[3] See Gauvin Alexander Bailey, *The Jesuits and the Grand Mogul: Renaissance Art at the Imperial Court of India, 1580–1630* (Washington, DC: Freer Gallery of Art, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 1998), 19. Also see Gauvin Alexander Bailey, "The Indian Conquest of Catholic Art: The Mughals, the Jesuits, and Imperial Mural Painting," *Art Journal* 57, no. 1 (1998): 25, accessed 15 March, 2026.

[4] Subrahmanyam opts for a 'connected histories' approach and views the exchange between Safavid, Mughal, and Dutch artists as reciprocal and transcultural. See Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Courtly Encounters: Translating Courtliness and Violence in Early Modern Eurasia* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 27. Also see Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "A Roomful of Mirrors: The Artful Embrace of Mughals and Franks, 1550–1700," *Ars Orientalis* 39 (2010): 76-77.

[5] Gregory Minissale has examined the various European techniques of sfumato, modelling and stereoscopic perspective adopted by Mughal artists in the *Khamsa* illustrations not as passive acceptance of 'superior' but as a means to articulate their own ideas and support their visual storytelling techniques. See Gregory Minissale, The Synthesis of European and Mughal Art in the Emperor Akbar's Khamsa of Nizami, *Asianart.com*, October 13, 2000, https://www.asianart.com/articles/minissale/. Also see Gregory Minissale, *Images of Thought, Visuality in Islamic India, 1550–1750* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2006), 10.

[6] Kavita Singh focuses on the repeated and cyclical process of adoption, rejection, and subsequent revival of Persianate and European visual idioms. See Kavita Singh, *Real Birds in Imagined Gardens: Mughal Painting between Persia and Europe* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, Getty Publications, 2017), 6.

deviation. It is this simultaneous reading of the visual and textual sources that sows the seeds for some of her most original findings.

The book is divided into five chapters, an introduction and an epilogue, which are thematically organised in order to understand how Mughal Occidentalism took shape ideologically and as a praxis. The Introduction begins with a broad overview pertaining to the use of the term Occidentalism by previous scholarship and provides an explanation regarding her own use of the term Mughal Occidentalism. For Natif, it is a mode of pictorial representation based on intentionally selected European elements, themes, and techniques which were repurposed by the Mughals to suit their own needs. Instead of viewing this process as the vexed binary phenomenon of 'self' and 'other', she looks at it as part of a more complex cultural movement embedded in cross-cultural connections and a form of knowledge production that included art practices not just of Europe but also Persia, China, Central Asia, and Turkey. She does so by introducing the reader to various connections and commonalities which can be spotted between Islamic and Christian iconography (p. 9).

In the first chapter, Natif explores how the politico-religious policy of *ṣulḥ-i kull* under Emperor Akbar and Jahangir enabled an atmosphere of openness and curiosity. She does so by providing a brief, selective chronology of Mughal-European encounters that encompassed trade and cultural exchange giving rise to new artistic sensibilities. Akbar's new policy of *ṣulḥ-i kull* ('peace with all' or 'universal conciliation') aimed at creating stability among various religious, social, and ethnic groups in the empire (p. 26-27). Instead of being viewed as exclusively foreign, Europeans were thus perceived by the Mughals to be part of their multicultural and diverse empire. This ideology of tolerance had a profound impact on Mughal culture through means of translations, illustrations, and the incorporation of various imageries, such as the peaceful coexistence of the lamb and lion symbolising harmony. Therefore, the policy of *ṣulḥ-i kull* aided in the creation of a pluralistic artistic language, was at the crux of cultural encounters, and formed the core of Mughal Occidentalism.

Another significant ideology guiding the Mughals was that of millenarian sovereignty, which placed emphasis on the divine and just ruler as the *mahdi* (Messiah) of the upcoming Islamic millennium. In order to assert their messianic claim as the *mujtahid* and universal sovereign, the Mughal emperor

was often depicted with a globe in his hands or beneath his feet in imperial paintings. Utilising the imagery of Madonna with Baby Jesus as an example, Natif persuasively establishes that Mughal messianic pretensions, as well as the need for a divinely-crafted genealogy, led to the incorporation of European symbols by artists in the royal workshops. By going beyond the previously held notion that it was the physical presence of Jesuits at the court that spawned the Mughal elite's interest in Renaissance art, Natif succeeds in bringing attention towards the fact that the process of intellectual engagement, technical analysis, and repurposing of European art techniques and subject matter was deeply rooted in the Mughal desire for visual pluralism in order to establish their dynastic legacy and identity.

In the second chapter, Natif claims to undertake a balanced approach to study the agency exercised by the Mughal rulers as patrons as well as artists in transforming European visual idioms and creating a capacious indigenous visual language that fit perfectly into the ideological framework of cultural pluralism under the reigns of Akbar and Jahangir. She highlights the crucial role of the master artists at the royal workshops in defining the process of Mughal Occidentalism. Natif argues that Mughal rulers, as patrons, expected the incorporation of European elements into paintings commissioned by them as a means to showcase their openness, intellectual prowess and to assert their cultural superiority (p. 6). According to her, artists in the royal atelier were required to master existing Persianate and European traditions and introduce innovations of their own, thus exercising their agency and autonomy. She compares Mughal paintings with their European inspirations through three case studies[7] in order to demonstrate how European techniques of modelling, sfumato, perspective, and portraiture were co-opted and images were recorded by the Mughal artists. She further throws light on elements of self-promotion and the political associations of the artists, thereby furthering her 'autonomy' argument.[8]

[7] The paintings she studies in depth include Nini's "Saint Cecilia," based on "Martyrdom of Saint Cecilia" by Hieronymus Wierix, Ruqaya Banu's painting of a man inspired by the figure of Adam in Jan Sandeler's "Adam and Eve after the Fall" and the reproduction of Dürer's "Saint John the Evangelist" by Abu'l Hasan.

[8] Modelling is the use of light and shade used to create a sense of volume, which adds to the portrait's life-like qualities. Sfumato is a painting technique which involves the use of soft and fine shading that leads to imperceptible and gradual transitions between tones and colours thus avoiding any harsh outlines. Perspective is the technique used by artists to

Despite her claims of using a balanced approach, Natif fails to address the complex issues pertaining to individual intellectual capabilities, attribution, imperial patronage, and workshop conventions, which are vital for understanding the debate on individual artistic agency in the Mughal atelier.[9] While it is pertinent to note that artists were responsible for bringing various political ideas to life, caution must be exercised in making emphatic claims of individual agency. The agency and interiority she recovers and confers on the artists highlight the limitation of her argument owing to the lack of definitive corroborative evidence. Her argument is largely inferred from the paintings themselves and the contemporary Persian texts on imperial preferences and policies. None of these sources provides any details regarding the thought processes and intellectual lives of individual painters and thus fails to buttress her claims.

The third chapter deals with the European objects depicted in Mughal paintings. One of Natif's major contributions lies in her use of the sociological theory of 'boundary objects', put forward by Susan Leigh Star and James Griesemer, in order to appreciate the interpretive flexibility and multifaceted purpose served by the presence of European articles in Mughal paintings. Boundary objects are objects which are both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites (p. 111). Going beyond the Mughal vs European binary, she claims that this approach enables her to view certain objects as both local and global through their combined functions of demarcation and commonality (p. 111-112). Natif shows how this process of re-contextualisation took place in two different ways. The first one included the incorporation of parts of European print, cut and pasted onto Persianate pictures, calligraphic works, and Mughal album folios in order to convey

represent depth as well as three-dimensionality of the objects on a two-dimensional surface such as paper.

[9] The debates range from an emphasis on individual agency by Beach, on imperial iconographic programmes by Koch to a nuanced approach straddling collaborative and individualistic methods by John Seyller and a workshop-centric one by Yael Rice making use of methods of social network analysis, digital humanities, and grassroots approach. See John Seyller, "Scribal Notes on Mughal Manuscript Illustrations," *Artibus Asiae* 48, no. 3/4 (1987): 247–77. Also see Yael Rice, *The Brush of Insight: Artists and Agency at the Mughal Court* (University of Washington Press, 2023).; Yael Rice, "Workshop as Network: A Case Study from Mughal South Asia," *Artl@s Bulletin* 6, no. 3 (2017): Article 4.

specific meanings. The other process involved the portrayal of objects such as globes and organs, stripped of their Christian connotations, by Mughal artists in order to ascribe new and specific meanings to them.

By depicting Jahangir 'in control of' the European terrestrial globe—as a metaphorical image, automata, and mechanical box- holding it, standing on it, resting his feet on it while holding its key, Natif argues that artists wanted to reflect his status as universal sovereign and 'dominator of the world'. Another such object, Natif highlights, is a European pipe organ which was depicted by the Mughal artists in an illustration of an episode from Nizami's *Khamsa*, as covered with Persian and Renaissance imagery. Imbued with layers of diverse meanings, the image symbolised the importance of mechanical and scientific knowledge, and the embodiment of political and spiritual power in a pluralistic society (p. 137). Mughal Occidentalism led to the creation of multifarious visual meanings and an augmented cosmopolitan imperial identity. Renaissance works were consequently meticulously studied for their materiality, painting technique and context, recoded, and 'Mughalised.'[10] Thus, by highlighting the insertion of an image of a luxurious European object into a Perso-Mughal context, Natif succeeds in showing how the study of the complex negotiation between heterogeneous layers of meanings, intervisuality, and sociocultural differences allows for a more nuanced understanding of the process of Mughal Occidentalism.

The fourth chapter sheds light on Natif's most authoritative and novel argument based on the urban and natural landscape paintings, produced during the reigns of Akbar and Jahangir. Going beyond illustrations accompanying narratives, Natif highlights the inclusion and function of panoramic depictions unrelated to the story or the event being described, which were added by the artists for compositional and ideological reasons. She negates viewing the use of receding panoramas in the Mughal paintings as imitations of European, specifically Flemish, landscape painting technique. Deviating from these conventions, Natif suggests that the manipulated use of European techniques and Renaissance pictorial features, such as landscape

[10] Ramaswamy demonstrates how Mughal artists made the globe their own by rendering it *Mughalai*. See Sumathi Ramaswamy, "Conceit of the Globe in Mughal Visual Practice," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 49, no. 4 (2007): 759, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4497706.

vignettes, drew inspiration from *ṣulḥ-i kull* and the Mughals' imperial desire to portray an idealised image of peace, pluralism, cultural cosmopolitanism and economic prosperity. These landscapes also helped reinforce the Islamicate notions of ethical rule mentioned in the descriptions of 'Virtuous City' (*madīna al-fāḍila*) in *Akhlaq-i Nasiri* of Nasir al-Din Tusi (p. 152).

The *Akhlaqi* ideals of moral rule and just organisation of the social order and state mandated that the ideal city be pluralistic. European elements and painting techniques were used to represent a tolerant empire by means of a diverse population, domesticated animals, harmony between the built environment and nature, safe passage, and inclusion of peoples of different faiths, signified by an array of Hindu temples, mosques, and European-style structures in the cityscape. *Akhlaqi* literature emphasises the 'circle of justice' based on the mutual dependency between the just ruler, army, and the productive population, which was depicted through cultivated lands symbolising political and economic stability. Artists, as is shown effectively by Natif, further incorporated a visual vocabulary based on local architectural idioms such as royal complexes, towers, gateways, walled cities, planned gardens, boats sailing on rivers, and travellers and ascetics traversing the landscape. In this manner, she successfully argues against the notion of viewing the adoption of receding landscapes simply as an aesthetic novelty and in favour of looking at it as a means to convey Persianate metaphorical and philosophical ideals and further enhance the Mughal ideological claims of cultural cosmopolitanism and universal governance.

In the final chapter of the book, Natif shifts her attention to royal portraiture and how it served to fulfil a variety of personal, political, intellectual, diplomatic, and spiritual purposes. Natif shows how portraiture played an important role in political administration by conveying royal ideas and notions of imperial sovereignty. The artists, she shows successfully, repurposed Renaissance iconography and used European techniques of modelling, sfumato, perspective, depth, and portraiture in profile in order to create a Mughal visual language of power, represent the complexities of the Mughal dynasty's identity, and create an imperial 'look' and dynastic image through the tradition of physiognomy (p. 205).

In Islamic art and spirituality, physiognomy (*ilm al-firāsa*) refers to the science through which people's physical features reflect their inner character, nature, and moral comportment (p. 232). This manifested in the form of royal anxiety to ensure the precise representation of the outer appearance and inner soul of the Emperor under the reigns of Akbar and Jahangir. The royal portrait was supposed to be the physical manifestation of the just ruler as the Perfect Man or *insan al-kamil* by enmeshing the outer being, entailing accurate physical rendering, highlighting rich textiles, jewellery, and emblems of sovereignty with the inner being, i.e., depiction of the emperor's character and personality as grand, divinely ordained, and just. Symbols such as those of the lamb and lion, European imageries of putti and angels, and Sufis were used to bolster these imperial ideologies in pictorial form. The argument is well substantiated by Natif through various paintings as well as inferences drawn from *Akbarnama* and *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*, which emphasise the need to link form or exterior appearance (*ṣūrat*) with inner meaning or essence (*maʿnī*).[11]

Lastly, the Epilogue discusses how her approach can be taken forward by a keen reader to explore whether a similar process was taking shape in other gunpowder regimes such as the Ottoman and Safavid empires. She briefly describes the ways in which Mughal Occidentalism was adapted by regional courts, such as those of Rajput rulers, and urges us to look at the evolution of this process beyond the 1630s. In this manner, the epilogue, instead of serving as a conclusion, touches upon some of the issues that are left unexplored while analysing the artistic connections, encounters and exchanges between the Mughals and Europe.

[11] Heike Franke has discussed *ṣūrat* and *maʿnī* as the connecting link between the allegorical paintings of Jahangir and the imperial ideology of Akbar. The Persian term *ṣūrat* meaning "portrait" or "appearance" indicates the temporal world while Arabic *maʿnī* connotes "virtue" indicating a "higher" spiritual world, very similar in meaning to *zahir* and *batin*, the "outer image" and the "inner reality". He showcases the degree to which the claim to power and the legitimation of sovereignty of Akbar and Jahangir was condensed into the formula of *ṣūrat* and *maʿnī* and linked with Ibn al-Arabi's conception of the "Perfect Man" or *insan al-kamil* as well as the *mahdi* or *sahib-i zaman*, thus rendering him as the "lord of the two worlds," or the "lord of *ṣūrat* and *maʿnī*." See Heike Franke, "Emperors of *Ṣūrat* and *Maʿnī*: Jahangir and Shah Jahan as Temporal and Spiritual Rulers," *Muqarnas* 31 (2014): 123–49, http://www.jstor.org/stable/44657300.

*Mughal Occidentalism* offers an in-depth and detailed analysis with the aid of over 100 coloured reproductions of Mughal and European paintings. The strength of this book lies in its reliance on, as well as formal analysis and critical reading of not just paintings but also Persian literary, historical, and intellectual primary sources and a deep and evaluative understanding of secondary sources. Such an approach, based on the combination of literary and visual sources, provides for a robust historical context for further art historical analysis. Its strength also lies in viewing the process of inclusion of European motifs and techniques in the light of the philosophical framework provided by ideological texts. This offers an entirely new dimension for understanding the Mughal-European artistic encounter.

Although a remarkable foray into novel ways of analysing the encounter, there are some avenues where the book seems to be lacking. Natif's definition of Occidentalism falls short of being critical and analytical. In her overview, she briefly refers to Edward Said's Orientalism, previous use of the term "Occidentalism" by scholars like Ebba Koch, and its more hostile use by Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit (p. 7-11). Here, Natif performs a disambiguating task by brushing past the darker, politically charged associations of the term while using it to describe Mughal repurposing of European iconography and techniques and viewing it as a celebratory and cosmopolitan phenomenon rather than as a hostile, anxious, and antagonistic one. Moreover, Natif's argument is based on specific case studies, which, despite their great attention to detail, make way for questioning the theoretical ambition of the term and its scope of application.

The book's title refers to the "Courts of India"; furthermore, Natif mentions 'North Indian courts' within the book as well, but goes on to only discuss the Mughals, barring a cursory reference made to the adoption of European techniques by the Rajput courts only in the epilogue (p. 269). Bringing attention to regional centres of art production calls for de-centring the Mughal court and viewing how these encounters were operating and manifesting on the regional scale in their engagement with the Rajput, Pahari, and Deccani courtly paintings. This would enable a more nuanced and critical way of analysing the characteristic traits of Mughal Occidentalism.

Natif claims to advance the methodological interventions of transculturalism presented by Subrahmanyam, but fails to describe these encounters in a truly bidirectional fashion. While Natif's focus is on understanding how the Mughals perceived and used European art, her failure to refer to the issue of the reception of Mughal court paintings in Europe limits the scope of her research. What this lacuna also does is that it inadvertently creates a hierarchy where one culture seems to be more proactive in terms of artistic production and mobility than the other. Furthermore, while Natif emphasises the strengths of the process of repurposing of European visual material by highlighting its cosmopolitan, philosophical, and iconographic significance and the consequent enhancement of the artists' skills, she falls short of presenting a more holistic picture of the process of Mughal Occidentalism. As a result, she fails to address the potential limitations of the process, such as loss of the original meanings, selective adoption of symbols, and a skewed emphasis on political messaging to depict Mughal superiority.

Nevertheless, this is a very lucidly written and well-researched book which opens up new perspectives and dialogues in dealing with the encounters between Mughal and European art. It offers original contributions to the field of art history in terms of methodological interventions and successfully establishes that the encounter between European and Mughal artistic cultures cannot be viewed through the simplistic 'influence' model and should be analysed as a nuanced process. The book leaves the reader with new questions and possibilities for future research concerning the process of European encounters taking place in the visual realm at the regional level during the early modern period. It also provides an entryway into looking at the same issue on a global scale and in a comparative manner by looking at the neighbouring Ottoman and Safavid empires. Furthermore, it opens up new discussions on issues of individual artistic agency in the Mughal atelier and leaves the reader with questions regarding the role played by gender in determining its character.

Since it opens up new avenues of thought and research, Mika Natif's *Mughal Occidentalism* is a must-read for researchers and students who are interested in understanding connections and multivalent interactions between cultures, the visualisation of intellectual theories and the portrayal of ideologies of kingship.

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# Abbas Panakkal. *Musaliar King: Decolonial Historiography of Malabar Resistance*. New Delhi: Bloomsbury, 2024, pp 281.

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The book *Musaliar King: Decolonial Historiography of Malabar Resistance* by Abbas Panakkal, at the outset, announces how it "endeavours to disentangle itself from these entrenched colonial narratives" (p. 17). He thus starts by scrutinising the existing historiography on the 'Malabar Revolt', popularly known as the 'Moplah Rebellion', and underlines how most historians have limitedly drawn on primary sources from the British archives. What emerged, as a result, was a colonial narrative in which events either acquired a communal colour (Hindu-Muslim conflict)[1] or underplayed colonial violence.[2] It also came to be simply termed as a peasant revolt.[3] It was K. N. Panikkar who looked at the "socioeconomic fabric of participants"[4] in order to offer a multi-causal explanation of the 'Malabar Resistance'.[5] He pointed out that "in the absence of class consciousness and proper leadership, the ideological influence of religion provided the necessary moral force and justification to struggle against exploitation and oppression."[6] Thus, "religion provided the context, though not the content, for the rebellion."[7] Panakkal gives credit, where due, to this approach, but points out that Panikkar turned it into "an amicable peasant revolt" (p. 14). The latter's emphasis on peasantry overlooked the fact that the leaders involved "were not peasants themselves"

[1] Reena Kapoor, "Mappila Riots: An Erased Episode of Hindu Genocide," *Itihas Darpan* 27, no.1 (2022): 195.

[2] Simon James Bytheway, "The Moplah Rebellion Reconsidered: Islamic Insurrection in Southern India, 1921-1922," *Journal of International Studies (JIS)* 6 (2010): 43-45.

[3] K. S. Hakim, "The Mappila Rebellion: A Historical Sociology Perspective," *Kerala Sociologist* 42, no. 2 (2014): 212.

[4] Panakkal, *Musaliar King*, 14.

[5] Hakim, "The Mappila Rebellion", 212.

[6] Ibid., 215.

[7] Ibid., 214.

(p. 14). Panikkar portrayed Gandhi and Shaukat Ali as playing an important role in the "politicisation of the peasantry" (p. 15) during the 1920s, but this might have downplayed the presence of anti-colonial resistance in the region dating back to the sixteenth century.[8] Panakkal then turns to the "nuanced aspects of resistance against oppressive practices of governance and acknowledges the complexities inherent in the struggles of the Malabar region" (pp. 17-18).

The book has been divided into two parts. The first part traces the events between 1920 and 1922 in the first four chapters, and the second part, comprising three chapters, focuses on the long history of resistance in Malabar by looking at the time period from 1498 to 1900. The first chapter re-examines colonial reports on the "alleged theft of a gun by Vadakke Vitil Mammad and the police case against him" (p. 24). Mammad was involved in Khilafat and tenancy protests, which irked the pro-British landlords. It was also during this time that a dispute arose between him and the Hindu landlord of Pukkottur, who had borrowed funds from him. The landlord sought help from his Muslim neighbours to arrive at a solution. British officers, namely Hitchcock (Police Superintendent) and Thomas (District Magistrate), sewed another narrative that portrayed this disagreement as evidence for the prevalence of fanaticism and militancy. A search was forcefully conducted at Mammad's residence with the aid of the village *adhikari* Perapurath Ahamad Kutti, who had a longstanding enmity with Mammad. The search turned out to be futile, and correspondence between M. Narayana Menon, the police inspector who led the search, and the Superintendent of Police in Malabar on 2 August 1921 records this.[9] Panakkal highlights the selective colonial historiography that erased details about "intercommunity financial transactions" for "advancing the policy of divide and rule" (pp. 33-34). He places special emphasis on the manner in which the Madras Mail served as a "source of colonial propaganda" (p. 26). It had a series on "Moplahs of Malabar" which highlighted "the murder of Hindus and defilement of temples" (pp. 26-27). Hitchcock and Thomas targeted Ali Musaliar, who, according to them, bore various titles like 'Khilafat King', 'Musaliar King' and 'Ali Raja.' Hitchcock asserted that Musaliar gathered people in the Tirurangadi mosque and encouraged them to fight the British. Panakkal underlines how, by portraying the mosque as a "site

[8] Panakkal, *Musaliar King*, 14-15.

[9] Ibid., 28-31.

utilised for waging war" (p. 55), the colonial government justified the massacre of twenty-four people at the Tirurangadi mosque on 20 August 1921.

The second chapter debunks the colonial tactic of portraying "the populace in Malabar as uncivilised" (p. 59), which was done in order to justify the violence unleashed upon them. Panakkal highlights the 1921 report from Madras (titled *Moplah Amazons*) which stated that "Moplah women" were "shouting the war cry-Allah hu Akbar", "they were clad in male attire", "they attacked the Hindus" and "this rebellion has produced many feminists" (pp. 59-60). The police journal *Echoes from the Jungle* (1905-06) further testifies to how 'othering' worked. The label 'jungle' determined how the colonial administration dealt with the local community,[10] and the martial law imposed on 24 August 1921 aided them in committing brutalities without impunity. The Special Tribunal Ordinance, promulgated on 23 September 1921, followed in their footsteps and blamed Musaliar for the events while erasing the role of Hitchcock and Thomas.[11] Panakkal underlines how the Tribunal used the trials "as performative endeavours for public consumption" (p. 81).

In the third chapter, Panakkal examines how these stereotypes reached the international audience through film and photography. The film *The Malabar Moplah Rebellion*, commissioned by the colonial government and screened on 5 January 1922, was divided into three parts depicting the "ravaged regions" (p. 106). Musaliar was identified as the arch conspirator, Lava Kutti was depicted as the murderer of Officer Rowley, while Kunhi Kadar was portrayed as the one who manufactured weapons. Initial reports suggested how two officers, Rowley and Johnstone, were killed by a mob. Hitchcock once again distorted the details. Meanwhile, A. W. Smith & CO. (Imperial Theatre, Bangalore) was given the rights for worldwide distribution, and the film was screened before Lord and Lady Wellington at Government House in Madras.[12] For the centenary commemoration of the rebellion, *Sciences et Voyages*, a French magazine, featured the photographs of "Mohammad Ali" and "two Moplahs who gave the signal for the uprising by murdering English settlers" (p. 109). Panakkal observed that Mohammad Ali's photo (or Ali Musaliar) was confused with another leader, Variamkunnath Kunhamed Haji. The colonial

[10] Ibid., 92.
[11] Ibid., 63-64.
[12] Ibid., 106-122.

propagandistic mechanism thus manufactured and maintained control over the narrative around the events of 1921.

The fourth chapter highlights how propaganda hid Malabar's tradition and history of communal harmony. Panakkal underlines that "in Malabar, the historical tapestry of anti-colonial resistance had been woven with the threads of unity, binding Muslims and non-Muslims in a shared 'Jihad' to safeguard the throne of the Hindu king, the Zamorin of Calicut" (p. 126). He brings forth the peculiarity of the Malabar resistance by observing that "the restoration of the khalifa of the Ottoman Empire and the propagation of Muslim interests" (p. 126) were less important. Even before the Khilafat movement, the Sufi leaders advocated non-payment of taxes to the British. The case of Malabar, then, is a divergence from the experience in North India, where the Zamorin was the amir, "obviating imperative for a Muslim Khalifa" (p. 126). Once the resolution on the Khilafat movement was taken up at the Manjeri Conference (28-29 April 1920), it became evident that religion never proved to be a deciding factor. Leaders like Annie Beasant and Rama Ayyer sided with the landlords, while K. P. Keshava Menon, M. P. Narayana Menon, and Ponmadath Moideen Koya supported tenants. The colonial administration depicted their resolution and speeches as symbolising the fanaticism of the Muslim community. Panakkal again critiques colonial propaganda by highlighting the fact that Kasturi Ranga Iyengar, editor of *The Hindu*, was the one who moved the resolution.[13]

The fifth chapter then explores the resistance offered by the people of Malabar against the Portuguese. As Vasco da Gama's arrival proved to be a threat, the Zamorin's mother gathered a meeting in a mosque to seek help from Muslim leaders. The Nair soldiers joined the effort, and both the communities resisted foreign encroachment together. Panakkal then calls for reconsideration of the existing historiography, where the events of 1857 are given a central position while talking about India's struggle for independence. According to him, the "pre-1921 resistance movements against colonial powers… transcending societal boundaries and discriminations" (pp. 157) need to be given due recognition. The chapter shifts focus to the changing game of sovereignty through the figure of Unni Mutha, a landlord who had Nair and Chetti

[13] Ibid., 132-135.

subordinates. Mutha aligned with Tipu Sultan and then collaborated with the British after Tipu's defeat. Once he was with the British, the accusation of fanaticism too disappeared. After prolonged conflicts, the British had to recognise his authority over Elambulasseri and his annual stipend of 1000 rupees. Mutha further demanded his share of revenue, which then culminated in prolonged enmity between the two.[14] Panakkal observes that establishing control over local leaders of Malabar was not an easy task for the newcomers.

The sixth chapter introduces the figure of Sayyid Alawi Thangal (famously known as Mamburam Thangal), a Qadiri Sufi whose shrine still stands as a testimony of his powerful influence. Thangal was the one who allotted land for setting up a temple for a lower caste woman. This is how the Kaliyattakavu Bhagavathy temple and the Kaliyattakavu festival came forth. Panakkal notes how even today, "a ceremonial effigy march" is taken out during the festival to pay "homage to the holy shrine of Thangal for his support" (p. 174). James Vaughan, District Collector and Magistrate of Malabar, unaware of Thangal's stature, had served a summons to him in 1817. He was accused of "assault on government property" (p. 175), which Thangal refused to accept. Panakkal remarks that the British were late to realise "the layers of sovereignty" (p. 176). Thangal's son, Sayyid Fazal Pookoya Thangal, continued the legacy by protecting tenants who were evicted by pro-British landlords, abolishing the use of titles for people belonging to the upper caste, ending the practise of consuming leftover food by the upper sections and advocating for relaxation from forced labour on Fridays. The British communalised matters and interpreted this as an attack on Hindu customs.[15] In order to avoid a direct confrontation, Fazal Thangal was exiled to Arabia on 19 March 1852.[16] Fazal Thangal then became the most revered persona in Ottoman politics.

The last chapter deconstructs the narrative around the assassination of Colonel Henry Valentine Conolly on 11 September 1855, who was the mastermind behind Fazal Thangal's exile. Newspapers (including the *Bicester Herald)* highlighted the "shock and helplessness" (p. 212) of Conolly's wife upon witnessing him being stabbed. Panakkal describes how the "fighters refrained from causing harm to the lady" (p. 212), which was not the case when colonial

[14] Ibid., 167-170.
[15] Ibid., 184-185.
[16] Ibid., 191.

administration dealt with the local populace. The ones who planned his assassination were celebrated by the local community back then. In recent times, however, "local historiography… aligned with the British perspective" (pp. 213-14) to commemorate Conolly as an "emblem of reformism" (p. 214) as seen in the Calicut Heritage Forum. Panakkal compares the episode with the assassination of O'Dwyer on 13 March 1940, after the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. Both of these incidents, according to him, showcased "the profound depths to which indigenous populations were willing to descend to counterbalance the dominion of colonial despotism" (p. 214).

Panakkal's book enriches one's understanding of the region of Malabar by comparing and contrasting British archival materials with the archives from Malabar, comprising oral stories, epistolary exchanges, diaries, personal notes, religious edicts, articles, poetic sources, personal interviews, etc.[17] The introduction of the term Malabar resistance itself proves the significance of his contribution to the decolonial historiography of the region and its tradition of resistance. He rightfully divests religious and racial connotations by abandoning the colonial labels like 'Moplah revolt'. He locates the violent events as a response from indigenous communities once their long-standing centres of sovereignty were attacked. In this, he engages with the role of women; yet the chapter doesn't make use of an important source, *Thithachumma's diary*, which recorded the turbulent times. Even though he underlines people's vested interests that determined their loyalties instead of religion, he doesn't consider how, within the Muslim community, prominent figures like Sayyid Sanaullah Makti Thangal (1847-1912) advocated a pro-British stance to overcome the label of fanatics. A consideration of his writings would have brought forth the complex alliances in the region.[18] Nevertheless, the book is exemplary in bringing forth the diverse indigenous perspectives that were prevalent at the time of the rebellion, while simultaneously moving away from colonial historiography.

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[17] Ibid., 18.

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# Ramachandra Guha. *Speaking with Nature: The Origins of Indian Environmentalism*. Gurugram: 4th Estate, 2024, pp 407.

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Ramachandra Guha's book begins with a quote from E. P. Thomson stating, "India is not an important country, but perhaps the most important country for the future of the world" (p. xi). While Thomson's comment intends to put forward the multiplicity of Indian cultures, and the richness of its diversity, Guha, through this book, brings out the existing myriads of environmental thought process in India which remained in circulation even before environmental history, or environmental humanities, were institutionalised. The book argues how India's model of economic development had failed because of its capital and resource-intensive model. However, the main crux of the book is the critique of Lester Thurow's idea that environmentalism is the practice of the upper middle class, and not the poor (p. xi). The book deals with ten thinkers who can be considered as early environmentalists in India, namely: Rabindranath Tagore, Radhakamal Mukherjee, J. C. Kumarappa, Patrick Geddes, Verrier Elwin, Mira Behn, Albert and Gabrielle Howard, K. M. Munshi and M. Krishnan. The book also attempts to constantly juxtapose the environmentalism of the elites with the environmentalism of the poor. It also interrogates the debate over Western and Indian ways of environmental thinking and posits individual and communal environmentalism as opposite binaries.

The first chapter – taking a cue mostly from Tagore's memoirs and letters — deals with Tagore's attempt at blending the natural and the cultural. It must be kept in mind that, despite the Indianness of his thinking, he was also a product of colonial modernity. Therefore, Tagore's ideology, as argued by Guha, deals with the blending of technology and nature. Despite being an integrated subject of colonial modernity, his critique of the Enlightenment hubris is both scathing and conspicuous in Guha's book. Here, Tagore's

nationalist frame of thought comes to the foreground, going beyond his naturalist ideology, and shows how Enlightenment created a break between humans and nature, while the Indian mind had no hesitation in acknowledging its kinship with nature. It is also interesting to note how his ideology always connected the love for the natural world with the political and economic forces that went on to threaten the natural setting, and this also allowed Tagore to connect industrialism with imperialism.

The second chapter deals with Radhakamal Mukherjee, a sociologist/economist turned environmentalist, who emphasised the shared communal usage of natural resources. Put simply, Mukherjee posited the individual environmentalism of the West as a category opposed to the communal environmentalism of India. As Guha argues, Mukherjee can be interpreted as one of the first economists to have realised the vital importance of common property resources for the sustenance of peasants in India. Guha further points out his emphasis on the co-existence of human, animal and plants, what Mukherjee calls 'symbiotic', where a single thread cannot be removed without disfiguring the whole mode of existence (p. 54). These ideas are an intellectual iteration of Guha's earlier formulations. While talking about the first wave of environmentalism, Guha demarcates three ideologies of this intellectual wave— scientific conservation, back-to-the-land and wilderness thinking.[1] According to Guha, Mukherjee's approach of not reading humans in isolation, but as part of natural ecology, makes him unique as he cannot be boxed under any of the three ideologies mentioned above.[2]

Typically, like Tagore, Mukherjee also equated industrialism with imperialism, considering it both as environmentally and ecologically unsustainable (p. 56). Guha's book fascinatingly brings out how he perceived the Hindu-Muslim conflict of Bengal as a result of the ecological crisis. According to him, the destruction of forests in the Chota Nagpur region dried up the rivers of West Bengal, and the careless expansion of canals and railways resulted in waterlogging, thereby giving birth to malaria which resulted in unprecedented deaths. While Muslim-dominated districts of the east had a prospering agricultural practice, resulting in robust population growth.

[1] Ramachandra Guha, *Environmentalism: A Global History* (New York: Longman, 2000), 62.

[2] ibid.

Therefore, he feared that Chittagong would displace Calcutta as the pre-eminent port of eastern India. He also feared that the demography would tilt towards the Bengali Muslims, and thus he urged Hindus to have larger families. It is fascinating how Guha, while discussing the origins of environmentalism in India, critiques Mukherjee's parochial identification with the Hindu upper castes (p. 57).

The third chapter deals with the Gandhian economist J. C. Kumarappa. In this chapter, Guha brings out the influences of Gandhi on Kumarappa and how his economic surveys display an early trend of environmentalism in India. Kumarappa's focus mainly revolves around sustainable planning for agriculture which, according to him, had to be focused on organic manure procured from human waste. It is noteworthy how Guha brings out his critique of caste prejudices by showing the problems with using human waste as manure due to the practice of untouchability (p. 76). Guha further observes that Kumarappa advocated the need for nurturing village industries not only for local income, but also for the sustainable use of natural resources. Interestingly, he had designed resource-conserving objects such as *Magan-Deep* (a lamp in which vegetable oil is used instead of kerosene) and *Magan Choola* (a stove that emitted less smoke and burnt biomass more cleanly) (p. 82).

Guha also used the animal parables to differentiate Western and Indian cultures. For him, Western culture was the 'pack type', whereas Indian culture was identified as the 'herd type'. In short, he portrayed Western society as violent, and Eastern society as its opposite, a non-violent variant (p. 83). Kumarappa also distinguished between what he called 'current economy' and 'reservoir economy', which otherwise we know as renewable and non-renewable energy, and according to him, the over-dependence on the latter led to ecological violence (p. 86). However, these ideas find fledgling expression in Guha's earlier book, *Environmentalism: A Global History*. While discussing Gandhian ideologies of environmentalism, Guha refers to two organisations- All India Spinners' Association and All India Village Industries Association.[3] Kumarappa played an important role in running these organisations, and his ideas on manure, water irrigation and communal

[3] Ibid., 24.

integrity only seem to be an intellectual extension of Guha's earlier formulations on the same thinker.

The fourth chapter deals with the Scottish town planner Patrick Geddes. In this chapter, Guha foregrounds his attempt to harmonise the country and the city through what Guha calls ecological town-planning. According to Guha, Geddes' town planning can be termed as 'ecological' in four respects: the relationship of the Indian city through its relation with water, Geddes' alert eye for spaces and his attempt to posit trees according to those existing spaces, the maintenance of reservoirs and tanks to reduce the city's dependence on hinterland, and also to prevent flooding. For the purpose of heritage preservation, he never advocated a complete doing away with the existing landscape. Instead, he advocated his motto as "To Postpone is to Conserve" (p. 126). These formulations, too, are an intellectual expansion of Guha's earlier postulations on Geddes, where he describes him as more of a social ecologist rather than a biological ecologist. Guha argues that he found the parasitic nature of Indian cities, which attempted to exploit the hinterland due to the extreme greed of energy resources, and this resulted in extreme pollution, which Geddes noted as "carboniferous capitalism."[4]

The fifth chapter deals with Albert and Gabrielle Howard. As Guha points out, Howards' major contribution was to bring the scientific experts down from their higher pedestal to the level of the ordinary citizen (p. 175). In short, they advocated for a science that was democratic. As Guha suggests, Howards' vision of human existence was that of an assemblage, in which the idea of monoculture had no importance (p. 165). The main concern of the Howards was amalgamating the indigenous expertise of Indian cultivators with scientific expertise. In other words, they attempted to combine ancient wisdom with modern science in order to create a more sustainable agricultural system. Gabrielle's ecological approach was more on plant life rather than agriculture. She emphasised understanding the changes that a plant goes through in its life cycle. In this regard, Guha brings out her innate and implied criticism of industrialisation that treats plants as food-producing machines for us (p. 177).

[4] Ibid., 61.

The sixth chapter is a commentary on the ecological concerns of Mira Behn or Madeleine Slade. Just like Kumarappa, Mira's main focus was on what one may call regionalism, i.e. to revive the village economy of India (p. 195). Her environmentalist thought mostly rested upon critiquing the idea of development. In order to show this, Guha examines her article titled "Development or Destruction". In this article, she discusses issues such as the government's new irrigation schemes, its attempts to reclaim wastelands, and her critique of using hasty chemical fertilisers. According to Guha, one of Mira's most important contributions is her commentary on the flooding of the Himalayas. Her explanation of why Banj Oak was much better in holding back the waters than the Chil Pine not only shows deep love for nature, but also her astute understanding of the surroundings and concern for the extreme ecological balance of the Himalayan region. Her ecological understanding was exemplified by her comment, "we must simplify if we are to survive" (p. 205). This is what Guha calls a 'Wordsworthian affinity' with nature.[5] The chapter is an extension of Guha's previous ponderings on Mira Behn, who calls man's attempts to extract profit out of Mother Nature through science and machinery short-lived and tragic.[6]

The next chapter deals with Verrier Elwin, whom Guha tries to present as a "forest anthropologist" (p. 218). Like the other thinkers analysed by him, there is a criticism of the nation-state and the capitalist machinery present in Elwin's theories as well. Guha's book shows that, according to Elwin, the danger for the Gond tribe was not wild animals, but the Repressive State Apparatus (state apparatus that functions by violence as Althusser would put it) exercised by the nation-state. While Elwin supported the swidden agriculturalists belonging to the Baiga community, he was also attempting to preserve their tribal rights through his engagement with the North-East Frontier Agency (a vast but thinly administered territory lying between India and China). His experiences in Shillong allowed him to understand the 'otherness' of tribal life with respect to civilised life. Yet, he envisioned a sense of exaltation within the tribal mode of living. While the other chapters are intellectual extensions of Guha's previous ponderings, this chapter is basically a crisp revisit to his full-

[5] Ibid., 68.

[6] Ibid.

fledged work on Elwin, titled *Savaging the Civilized: Verrier Elwin, His Tribals and India*.[7]

The subsequent chapter deals with a full-fledged politician, the minister of Food and Agriculture department in Nehru's cabinet, K. M. Munshi. Guha claims that, as the forest department came under the Food and Agriculture ministry, it allowed Munshi to posit himself as the first Indian thinker who fused religion with environmentalism. Guha argues that one of the most important penchants of his environmentalism was his initiation of the *Vana Mahotsava*. The writer-politician-lawyer also advocated how people of India had managed to maintain an equilibrium with nature (p. 260). While his environmentalism was always referring to Indian myths and puranas, it was not free from criticism. People like Thakorelal M. Desai and Karaka had criticised Munshi's ideology as insubstantial, and even as an overdramatised political stunt (pp. 263-64). Despite this criticism, it cannot be denied that Guha's book brings out the importance of Mushi's environmentalism both from the vantage point of politics and mythology.

The last chapter deals with M. Krishnan. Guha keeps this chapter at the end, probably because he is the only thinker whose environmentalism subverts human agency and talks about the nonhuman. It is interesting how Krishnan was interested in plants as much as animals. It is also fascinating how he dealt with the so-called non-charismatic mammals, such as the blackbuck or even the lion-tailed macaque. This proves that Krishnan not only dismantled the human-nonhuman hierarchy but also critiqued the human desire for valorising the charismatic animals such as the tiger. Guha also points out how Krishnan was disappointed with Munshi's *Vana Mahotsava* because of its promotion of exotic tree species instead of Indian trees. As a true naturalist and also a nationalist, Krishnan points out the importance of 'Indian' trees. Probably that's why Guha had to contend between describing him as either a patriot or xenophobe while arguing about his ideas on plants and trees (p. 295). He also propagated how India's natural heritage should constitute its identity.

There is no denial of the fact that Guha's book is a comprehensive attempt to trace the origins of Indian environmentalism which predated the birth of

[7] Ramachandra Guha, *Savaging the Civilized: Verrier Elwin, His Tribals, and India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

environmentalism as a critical school within the humanities. It is also interesting to note that, during times of institutionalisation, most of these thinkers had subscribed to an interdisciplinary approach. The term 'social ecology' came into fashion through Murray Bookchin in the 1980s.[8] However, the term was used by Radhakamal Mukherjee during the 1940s, and his approach was interdisciplinary as he was a sociologist among ecologists, and an ecologist among sociologists (p. 336). Apart from Mukherjee, all the other thinkers propagated an interdisciplinary approach, such as Geddes, who approached his environmentalism through architecture, and through his usage of spaces, Munshi approached it through religion and myth. The Howards attempted to combine science with agriculture, Mira Behn and Elwin attempted to fuse state policies with environmentalism, Krishnan looked at the whole existence of living organisms as interconnected and dependent on each other, Kumarappa approached his environmentalism by eradicating social prejudices such as untouchability, and Tagore attempted to reach at a mode of existence that acknowledged both nature and culture where one doesn't preside over the other.

The book remains relevant for contemporary society through its referential connections, with problems such as climate crisis, and scholarship pertaining to aspects of posthumanism. Climate change has been one of the most debated ideas across the globe now. Since Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stromer's coinage of the term 'Anthropocene', humans' engagement with the natural world has been interrogated from various vantage points. One such vantage point is Posthumanities. As argued by Erika Cudworth and Stephen Hobden, posthumanism is an imagination of a world consisting of more-than-humans[9]. In other words, Posthumanities interrogate(s) human supremacy over other species, and attempt(s) to imagine a more sustainable world. While in the era of climate crisis such scholarship is invaluable, there is also no denial of the fact that such scholarship has been an exclusive proprietorship of humans. In

[8] Bookchin presented his theory as an alternative to both Deep Ecology and orthodox Marxism. The former emphasized environmental protection while neglecting social inequality, whereas the latter denied ecological limits to growth and treated environmental concerns as a bourgeois distraction from class politics. So, Bookchin proposed his ideas as a middle path that deals with social inequality as well as ecological preservation.

[9] Erika Cudworth and Stephen Hobden, *The Emancipatory Project of Posthumanism* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 5.

similar fashion, Guha's book claims to trace the origins of Indian environmentalism, which was in circulation way before the 1980s, a time considered as the zenith of environmentalism. Yet, the book remains silent on the aspect of critiquing human centrality. Apart from Krishnan, all the other thinkers of the book suffer from what one may call a 'human bias'. State policy to town planning, swidden cultivation to organic manure, or even in its criticism of the general idea of 'development', the book remains silent on the issue of nonhumans to show that the whole idea of being 'sustainable' comes from the vantage point of humans. For example, Guha shows how Mira Behn critiques the government programme for reclaiming wastelands for cultivation. Mira says that these lands, instead of being used for cash crops, should be used for fodder crops. However, this idea was not in favour of the land, it was in favour of human beings. Not unlike this idea, Mukherjee's ideals, Kumarappa's policies, or even the Howards' sympathy for plants, grew out of a deep desire to sustain humans. Even Gabrielle Howard's critique of treating plants like machines grew out of a far-sighted desire to preserve the human race, rather than out of an empathy for the plants themselves.

However, Krishnan's ideas centralise the nonhumans. However, his idea of 'Indian' trees remains open to criticism. Guha, in this regard, rightly pointed out that he almost seems xenophobic regarding plants, and almost tends to forget that this geo-political queerness is a social construct, and its imposition on the natural world seems misplaced. Despite such criticism, it is also true that Krishnan understands the importance of not only fauna, but flora as well. In this regard, Jeffrey Nealon's critique of Derrida might be of immense importance. According to Nealon, the West suffers from what one may call 'white mythology', meaning that animal life is given more importance than plant life. This is represented by God's refusal of Cain's vegetable offering and acceptance of Abel's animal offering.[10] Even while talking about Derrida's *Beast and the Sovereign Lectures*, Nealon shows how the plants and the flowers are considered to be excluded from the beasts and the human organism.[11] Therefore, the West has always prioritised animal life over plant life. Thus, one might conclude that Krishnan was able to see what even Derrida had failed to

[10] Jeffrey T. Nealon, "The Plant and the Sovereign: Plant and Animal Life in Derrida," in *The Posthumous Life: Theorizing Beyond the Posthuman*, ed. Jami Weinstein and Claire Colebrook (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 107.

[11] Ibid.

see. Thus, Krishnan's way of dealing with flora and fauna itself could have been a criticism of the West without being xenophobic regarding plants. His handling of flora and fauna in equal measures could have made him a nationalist without being a jingoist who attempts to enforce racial prejudices into the natural world.

To conclude, Guha's book is an attempt to trace the genealogies of Indian environmentalism in its multiple forms. The book captures various aspects of environmentalism in its interdisciplinary form, both in the pre-independence and the early days of post-independence India. In order to do that, Guha creates a fascinating portrait of his previous postulations and recent broodings in order to trace a comprehensive historical discourse of environmentalism in India.

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# Isha Dubey ed. *Remembrance, Forgetting and Utterance: Rethinking the Politics of Memory in South Asia*. London: Routledge, 2025, pp 213.

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*Remembrance, Forgetting and Utterance: Rethinking the Politics of Memory in South Asia* is a collection of interdisciplinary essays that explore how societies remember and reinterpret their pasts. It offers varied perspectives for examining the complex forms and workings of collective memory in South Asia. This volume opens up South Asia's entanglement with the politics of remembering and forgetting in ways that go beyond the event of Partition thematically, temporally and geographically. It explores how religion, region, caste, class, and their fraught intersections with the legacy of colonialism, shape collective remembrance and intentional forgetting across the South Asian landscape.

By incorporating diverse regional views for understanding collective memory, the book has broadened the discourse on the politics of memory both thematically and methodologically. It brings together essays that address partition, caste oppression, urban transformation, memorial architecture, and cultural practices, expanding the scope of South Asian memory studies beyond dominant narratives, thereby foregrounding marginalised perspectives.

The book has six thematic parts, containing twelve chapters in total that address the questions of memory in South Asia. The introductory chapter establishes the conceptual framework by situating South Asian memory studies within broader global scholarship. The editor outlines that the research in the field of memory studies has been overly dominated by the study of the 1947 Partition and its traumatic aftermath. It enforces the point that while Partition has been a watershed event and certainly created a significant

historical rupture, memory studies in the region need to move beyond the event. By presenting collective memory as a site of contested narratives, the introductory chapter sets the stage for the chapters that follow.

The opening chapter, 'Memory as Mechanism of Protest in Two Bengali Dalit Narratives,' by Runa Chakraborty Paunksnis examines the post-partition collective memory narratives of Bengali refugees. It brings forth the narratives of marginalised communities to argue that erasure of Dalit experiences in Partition narratives is a "wilful amnesia" (p. 17) from the Dalit standpoint. The discussion raises significant questions about the narrative authority and whether narratives outside of the community can do justice in articulating such specific trauma experiences. The author argues that the representation of the past and its dissemination through the social and cultural apparatus of the State are always ideologically invested processes, and hence, the interests of the dominant power influence the construction of collective memory. She adds;

> The grand narrative of the Partition of India, despite its problematic subliminal crosscurrents, is built upon the frame of nationalist interpretations and, therefore, it chooses to exclude those micro-processes of remembering that are not aligned with the proposed interpretations. (p. 28)

Similar questions are raised by Greeshma Mohan in 'Remembering and Responsibility: A Study of Dalit Life Narratives.' The chapter argues that Dalit autobiographies are more than ethnographic documents that represent marginalised subjectivities and make visible the traumatic memories of discrimination. Through the analysis of Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* and Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants*, the chapter discusses how marginalised memories can challenge official histories and create alternative memories of the nation. This intervention is particularly valuable because it highlights the archival value of literature and questions the 'omissions' in the selected historical narratives.

Representation of 'spaces' is not neutral when one examines how they are constructed and reconstructed to meet a certain political narrative. The

"fetishisation of space in service of state"[1] is what Hamari Jamatia's chapter, 'Missionary Geography and the Imaginations of Sacred Space in Post-colonial North-East India' in some ways dissects. It discusses the way indigenous spaces during the colonial times were ascribed with attributes like 'filthy' or "heathen", in the missionary narratives of the nineteenth century. Through a comparative study between missionary geographical imaginations of the nineteenth century and contemporary reworking of these spaces in the literary works of Naga writer Temsula Ao and Khasi writer Janice Pariat, the essay explores the native writers' quest for reclaiming a geographical identity through the works of fiction. It discusses how Indigenous writers from the North-East, using cultural memory, reimagine their ancestral landscapes, turning colonial sites of 'sanitisation' into complicated spaces of resistance and identity.

If spaces are contested and constructed, monuments are equally symbolic representations and articulations of a cultural and political memory. In 'Evoking Public Memory and Re-writing Histories' Shabana Ali explores the relationship between memorial architecture and political identity with reference to the anti-caste Ambedkarite movement in India. The author argues that the memorials of Dalit leaders in the public parks in Lucknow during the rule of the Mayawati government were not just commemorative structures, but "instruments of a loud public assertion of a suppressed memory" (p. 59). These monuments challenged the erasure of Dalit history from public memory at the intersection of the politics of spatial practices and collective memory.

An important question worth revisiting is whether the past can be entirely recollected or entirely obliterated. The answer is perhaps attempted by Šarūnas Paunksnis in 'Spectrality of the Past: Haunted Memories, Transforming Urban Space and Bengali Cinematic Imagination'. This chapter examines the complex interplay of memory and space dynamics through urban evolution in the city of Kolkata. Through the framework of urban developments and neoliberalism, the author contends that the memory of the past endures as "cultural hauntings" and that it continually influences urban identity. It examines this subject from a cinematic perspective, analysing *Bhooter Bhobishyat* (2012), a Bengali film by Anik Datta, which posits that this

[1] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, (Blackwell Publishing, 1991), 21.

problematic relationship is "fundamentally spectral, manifesting, at least in cinema, as a type of haunted imagination" (p. 75).

Adding to the concept of space and how it can become a symbolic narrative to represent political concerns, 'Romancing Ruins: Architectural Memory in Gulabo Sitabo', Zehra Kazmi furthers the analysis on 'space', suggesting that the film under discussion complicates the established notions of character and setting through a complex web of political and cultural implications. By using the metaphor-metonymy symbolism, the mansion, which is at the centre of the plot, emerges as a liminal space, falling somewhere in between object and subject.

Under the theme of 'Negotiation History and Memory,' various chapters deal with the opposition between the popular collective remembering and state history. Manoj Parameswaran and Aiswarya Sanath's chapter 'Memory and Counter-Memory Re-membering the Malabar Rebellion' examines the politics of memory surrounding the contentious event of the Malabar Rebellion in Kerala. It examines how various political actors, particularly those on the right, reinterpret, challenge, and use historical narratives to validate their contemporary political agendas. It also discusses how these distortions and the selective remembering of certain events related to the Malabar Rebellion led to the alienation of the Mappila community from contemporary public and political discourses.

The contest to inscribe oneself or a political party in history is taken up by Mohammad Waqas Sajjad in 'History Writing and the Pakistani Ulama'. This chapter discusses how competing narratives of *Deobandi* and *Barelvi* school traditions have been understudied because the master narrative of the nation has been occupied with different contestations and oppositions. However, it is worthwhile to admit that both schools have tried to align themselves with the state narratives for validation and to establish themselves within their country's heroic past. Their narratives are subsequently based on selective remembering and forgetting. In an attempt to align their histories with Pakistan's official past, they created stories that have since become "axiomatic in their competition over legitimacy" (p. 130).

The section on 'Remembering Displacements' explores the impact of dislocation and the trauma associated with it, which can be individual or mediated through collective memory. The chapter by Trina Bose and Punyashree Panda, 'Cultural Memory of Climate Crisis and Human Displacement in Amitav Ghosh's Gun Island,' explores the intersection between climate change and human migration. It explores the issues of displacement of the marginalised poor of the 21st century from an actual place in India, i.e. the Sundarbans. The chapter brings to the fore the struggles of remembrance and survival of the peripheralised people who have to bear the consequences of environmental breakdown. While resilience is the way forward to cope with the trauma of displacement, the other way to reconcile with trauma is continuing the association with the memory of food culture.

The next chapter, 'Food as Memory among Punjabi Partition Survivors,' by Mohini Mehta discusses how food and gastronomy serve as a bridge between the past and the present. The author uses the example of Punjabi migrants who moved to Delhi after the Partition to show how cooking traditions helped rebuild group identity. The chapter contends that these culinary inventions signify a process of cultural adaptation whereby displaced groups navigate new economic circumstances while preserving linkages to their historical context.

The last thematic section on 'Historical Injustice and Collective Trauma' deals with narratives of remembrance of personal narratives and injustice. 'Reading Remembrance and Reconciliation in Post-War Nepal through Tara Rai's Chapamar Yuwati ko Diary' by Kritika Chettri dwells on how women remember the Nepal civil war. The chapter discusses how the act of writing and remembering becomes a means to memorialise one's personal experience of the war as worthy of commemoration too. The author talks about how these personal diaries made writing not just a way to let out feelings, but also a political act that let women tell their own stories about why they joined the war, in the hopes of 'finding forgiveness' (p. 181) and being accepted in the present. The last chapter focuses on museums and national memorials, especially the Museum of Independence in Dhaka. Isha Dubey's 'Curating National Pasts and Historical Trauma: Mourning and Loss in the Cultural Memory of the 1971 Bangladesh War' examines how memorial spaces deploy a cultural trauma of the past to curate a collective national memory. It

examines the emotive and affective relationship of visitors with the museums in the city that confer a certain kind of meaning onto these places.

*Remembrance, Forgetting and Utterance: Rethinking the Politics of Memory in South Asia* is an earnest attempt at pushing the boundaries of memory studies in South Asia. It successfully paves a way to look at cultural memory in South Asia beyond the already existing interventions and expands the conversation on the politics of memory in ways that are relevant to the fraught history of South Asia.

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# Ayesha Jalal. *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan.* New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 1985, pp 310.

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Human beings are not the only social entities that can lay claim over a diverse and dynamic set of identities. Postcolonial societies and newly established nation-states have had to contend with the numerous options available at their disposal when it came to creating and inventing markers of recognition for themselves. The curious case of Pakistan presents itself as a fascinating and revealing case study that can aid in understanding how new nation-states, too, dealt with acute crises of identity. They faced adverse challenges and therefore existential issues ceased to be something that remained limited to the domains of human social and political spaces. Countries appear to be anything but immune to such processes. After all, what are individuals without their nation-states, and vice-versa?

Having touched upon the nuances of Mohammad Ali Jinnah's career, as articulated by Ishtiaq Ahmed[1] in a previous review of the book authored by him,[2] I now turn towards the work of Ayesha Jalal in order to understand, and possibly show, how her book is both at odds and in sync with Ishtiaq Ahmed's opus. *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan* is a peculiar piece of historical analysis that, like every ideological work of scholarship ever authored, effortlessly betrays the numerous biases couched within the academic consciousness of its writer. Having been criticised by Ahmed himself, it also becomes urgent for us, as consumers of historical academia, to assess the authenticity of the fallacies pointed out by him. This will aid us in making an informed opinion and, ultimately, decide whether or

[1] Ishtiaq Ahmed, *Jinnah: His Successes, Failures and Role in History* (India: Penguin Random House India Private Limited, 2020).

[2] Ramya Ramanathan, review of *Jinnah: His Successes, Failures and Role in History*, by Ishtiaq Ahmed, *Reading the Archive* 1, no. 1 (2025): 1–5.

not we are in agreement with the historical and historiographical dispositions that they possess and reflect. Ayesha Jalal's work evokes a number of reactions in the minds of its readers, and hence, the reason for the extended period of time it took for myself to bring to surface some of the extremely complex and confusing observations about the matter at hand. Because, despite all the negative publicity that Jalal's 'Spokesman' has garnered over the years, Jinnah's life was indeed convoluted, as well as paradoxical, and it would be an understatement to use the same term to describe his politics, a product of the communal currents of the politically volatile South Asian 20th century.

In all honesty, *The Sole Spokesman* reads as a historical and political description that is less about M. A. Jinnah and is, instead, excessively focused on the dynamics and dichotomies prevalent in the provinces that were partitioned in 1947. While the inputs provided by Jinnah and the Muslim League do figure quite prominently in the book, they are painted in a starkly different hue—a shade of interpretation that confidently asserts that Jinnah was not a politician by nature. He was a lawyer and staunch constitutionalist. As a result of his professional temperament, he had a weak grip over the political landscape of the late 1930s and early 1940s, a point that becomes apparent when Jalal states, "But Jinnah did not understand provincial politics before 1937—indeed is doubtful if he ever understood them. Paradoxically, separate representation proved to be the big obstacle in his way." (p.19). He wished to have a strong centre for the administrative set-up of post-colonial India, a socio-political goal that even the Congress strived to achieve. It is from these contentions that the infamous 'bargaining counter' argument emanates (p.57).

Like an extremely adept mind-reader, Jalal conveys how Jinnah made demands that he did not actually wish to pursue, in order to achieve two objectives of his in a simultaneous fashion: (a) to project himself as the face and voice of Indian Muslims and the Muslim League; and (b) to put forward demands that he did not wish to pursue in order to witness them being refuted by the Congress and, as a result, coyly achieve what he actually wanted, in all seriousness. This particular part of the book makes one question the nature of the interpretational analyses that Ayesha Jalal undertook. At many points throughout the book, she mentions several aspects of political projects that Jinnah either wished or did not wish for. Her manner of putting the blame on Congress' doorstep as being the main party responsible for the Partition also

seems misplaced, especially when she borrows from Mountbatten's interview with Vallabhai Patel towards the end of the opus:

> As Patel laid down in a few choice words: Congress had 'reached the maximum limit of their concessions'. It would not give the League parity in the interim government, even if this brought Jinnah in. If the League was not ready to accept the (Cabinet) Mission's proposals without further ado (and without safeguards) then, quite simply, the 'Congress desired partition'. (p. 260)

How did she know, with utmost surety and sincerity, what the Quaid-e-Azam actually wanted, after almost 40 years since the unravelling of the horrors of 1947 (Jalal's book was published in 1985)? It can be conceded that the sources she resorted to were extensive and well-probed into, but even thorough research does not permit a scholar to employ assumptions as bases for factual assertions of a historiographical character. The foundation of Pakistan is tangible evidence and strongly sufficient to show what Mohammad Ali Jinnah actually wanted, despite the air of ambiguity and uncertainty that surrounded the creation of a separate homeland for India's substantial Muslim population in the 1940s.

Pakistan's structure had been left drowning in ambiguity by Jinnah. According to Jalal, he did so deliberately, because by not defining what he meant or wanted gave him space and time for political deliberations. I would like to argue that this was not the case. A closer look at Jalal's own text reveals to us that Pakistan was very much desired by the Muslim League and the masses they had managed to mobilise. What was left vague and uncertain was the administrative and constitutional edifice of Pakistan—it was a nation, a fledgling one at that, being imagined without a proper structure. How would the country be run? Who would lead bureaucratic operations? These crucial discussions never took place at the level that they should have been carried out at. Therefore, to reiterate, the demand for Pakistan, and tendencies of secessionism among provinces and princely states can be clearly proven and substantiated through a number of sources. The real issue, that was shrouded in unpredictability, was of an operative, bureaucratic kind. Another interesting element of the book is the portrayal of Jinnah as a weak politician.

Jalal's work makes it seem as if he was just a lawyer, and not very adept at dealing with politics as a vocation, something that provincial leaders like Suhrawardy from Bengal and Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan from NWFP were conditioned in:

> It was important for Jinnah and the League to retain the appearance of control even when the reality eluded them. But from the Viceroy's point of view all this was unconvincing prevarication. Not surprisingly, Jinnah was in a 'high state of nervous tension', spoke of being at the end of his tether and begged the Viceroy 'not to wreck the League'. The question of who was to represent Muslims had, the Viceroy could see, placed Jinnah in 'great difficulties', 'largely of his own making', but he was in danger of becoming the 'scapegoat for the failure of the Conference'. (p. 131)

The provincial politics of Punjab and Bengal have also been discussed at length by Jalal. Jinnah has been shown as someone who was struggling to get the message of the Muslim League across several regions of Punjab and Bengal. It becomes evident that the regional disparities and distinctions among the Muslim masses manifested themselves in the wider realm of provincialism and the differential impact of such a situation became hard to contain. The Muslim League failed to find a firm footing in the initial stages of its political development, before swallowing up the working committees of its opponents, i.e. the Unionist Party (Punjab) and the Krishak Praja Party (Bengal).

Despite all its drawbacks, *The Sole Spokesman* reveals an important and factually sound dimension of Punjab's political culture—it was dominated by a number of oligarchical, familial groups that had a dynamic relationship with each other. In commentaries about Ayesha Jalal's work, this aspect of the book is, comparatively, less touched upon. In the case of Punjab, "....the ambitions of families, whether rising or falling.. Saw a chance of tipping the balance in their own favour" (p. 87). The mediations amongst the Muslim League, Unionist Party and their stakeholders—the Mamdots, Daulatanas and Hayats—along with the relevance and importance of the influence of religious and socially revered personalities (pirs, moulvis, and the *biraderi* as a socio-economic unit), give much needed insight into the complexities of political life in pre-Partition Punjab. Bengal, on the other hand, did not have such a nexus

in place, but the actions and decisions of key figures in the Bengal ministry, such as Nazimuddin, Suhrawardy and Ispahani, among others, have not been neglected either. This particular part of the book, therefore, does come across as a legitimate source of information due to the evidentially proven, tumultuous political history of both Punjab and Bengal.

"The strength of Jalal's work is her forthright repudiation of the historicist assumption that because an independent Pakistan came into existence such a state was intended by Jinnah as he campaigned for Pakistan from 1940-47", writes the American Historical Review.[3] This particular review of Jalal's book seems extremely problematic. Exactly 40 years have passed since the publication of Ayesha Jalal's book and the infamous 'bargaining counter' argument has become not just its defining component, but of the entire corpus of literature available on the Partition of 1947, as well. Commentators have always shown Jalal's work as being part of revisionist historiographical trends that attempt to hold the Congress Party responsible for the fate of British India. It is obvious, and quite unavoidable, for Jalal's opus to be steeped in the biases of the ideological currents of the school of thought she was influenced by the most - the Cambridge School of Historiography. Subsequent reviews have debunked and refuted Jalal's hypothetical premises on a large scale and it would not be inappropriate to assert that her book itself, paradoxically, has become a poster child of everything that Jinnah and the Muslim League did *not* do. It also happens to be the only book, while being an important limb of mainstream Partition historiography, that has constantly been bashed, and continues to bear the brunt of sharp critical analyses. It cannot be stated that these criticisms were without any sound, valid footing. Most of the academic accusations levelled against Jalal are not wrong, in fact, far from that.

Despite all of these accepted observations and scholarly critiques, it is extremely crucial for us to change the manner in which we look at Ayesha Jalal's book. The prevalence of a number of dubious arguments (for instance, how Jinnah did not desire a partition of the subcontinent, in addition to his dream of achieving a strong government at the centre, instead of a weak one with more power vested in federating units) should not, however, deter us

[3] Thomas R. Metcalf, review of *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League, and the Demand for Pakistan*, by Ayesha Jalal, *American Historical Review* 92, no. 4 (October 1987): 1021–22.

from seeing the limited yet legitimate insights that have been made available to us. It does offer an alternative lens to look at the dynamic nature of provincialism that has very often been overlooked. At the same time, we must also not lose sight of the need to critically analyse, examine and question these political trajectories and backdoor negotiations that critics have conveniently sidelined. A true critique of Jalal's work can only be fruitful if all these elements figure in it, along with the well-known rebuttals made by historians.

A significant question begs for our attention and consideration: have the last 40 years produced alternative, real and in-depth analyses pertaining to Mohammad Ali Jinnah's life, a genuine attempt that has not been overshadowed by the contemporary political prerogatives of painting the Quaid-e-Azam's past with the unnecessary pallor of sensationalism? Personally, I do not believe that this is the case. The limits that exist in the human capacity to read everything at once continues to impede our desire to know everything.

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# Ram Madhav. *The New World: 21st-Century Global Order and India*. Rupa Publications India, 2025, pp 408.

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## Introduction

*The New World: 21st-Century Global Order and India,* written in 2025 by Ram Madhav, is an important addition to the series of books written on the theme of global power transitions and their implications for India's foreign policy. Ram Madhav is an important strategic thinker in India who has served as the National General Secretary of the Bharatiya Janata Party.[1] He is also a member of the National Executive of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. Given this context, the author in the book tries to examine an important question in the current geopolitical situation. The question is, "How India can navigate an evolving "heteropolar" world order shaped by multipolar geopolitics, technological disruption, climate change, and civilisational values" (pp. 3-17).

In his book, Madhav argues that "India has both an opportunity and a responsibility: to adapt, to lead, and to help shape what comes next" (pp. 13-29). This argument he makes in the context of the post-1945 liberal international order, which is increasingly under strain. These strains are the rising authoritarian powers, contested multilateralism, rapid technological change, demographic flux, climate crisis, etc.

The author tries to study the changes around the world from a South Asian vantage point and underlines the role India can play in the emerging geopolitical situations. Here, the author also suggests that since the entire

[1] Some of his other most recent works include: *Our Constitution, Our Pride* (New Delhi: Prabhat Prakashan, 2025); *Partitioned Freedom: The Long Road to India's Independence and Partition* (New Delhi: Rupa Publications India Pvt. Ltd., 2022); *The Hindutva Paradigm: Integral Humanism and the Present* (New Delhi: Westland Publications, 2020); *The Indian Reality: Stories and Reflections* (New Delhi: India Foundation, 2024).

South Asian region is bound by shared histories, interdependent economies, and common vulnerabilities, there can be a united response to systemic changes around the world.

Given this, we can argue that while Madhav's civilisational framing about the Indian subcontinent is compelling, his proposals also raise questions about feasibility, inclusivity, and the limits of regional cooperation in the current geopolitical situation. We find that the book appeals to India's civilisation, culture, and historical mindset. The book also urges policy realism and institutional reform. But we find that, like any other work, this book also has its strengths and limits, especially when we see it through the lens of the many challenges and constraints in the context of South Asia.[2]

## Key Themes

### Multipolarity and Heteropolarity

The book posits that the unipolar moment of U.S. dominance is getting over. As a result, there is a coming up of a world which is more complex. This complex world is characterised by both "multipolarity" and "heteropolarity" (pp. 75-78). The book argues that, unlike classical multipolarity among states, heteropolarity is also marked by non-state actors such as multinational corporations, technology giants, and transnational activist networks, all of which influence international outcomes.[3] For instance, in South Asia, technology firms shape political discourse, and climate NGOs influence energy transitions.[4]

### Decline of Old Multilateral Institutions

In his book, Madhav critiques the inability of post-World War II institutions[5] to come to terms with contemporary crises (pp. 15-65). In order to better reflect

[2] Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, *South Asia and Multilateralism: Challenges and Correctives* (New York: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung New York Office, 2025).

[3] "Even Tech Giants Can Be Non-State Actors: Ram Madhav on New World Order," NDTV, July 24, 2025, https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/even-tech-giants-can-be-non-state-actors-rsss-ram-madhav-on-new-world-order-8936205.

[4] Observer Research Foundation, *A Strategic Approach Towards AI Sovereignty* (New Delhi: Observer Research Foundation, 2026).

[5] Institutions such as the United Nations and the World Bank.

today's power distribution, Madhav calls for reforms in these institutions. This is a crucial observation that he makes because a rebalanced system could amplify voices from the Global South. Different studies show that South Asia is marginalised within existing multilateral frameworks.[6]

## Technology, Demographics, and Climate

Madhav argues that technology and demographics will be the two significant factors in shaping the nation's power (pp. 350-78) and that India must invest in critical domains like artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and biotechnology in order to build an "*atmanirbhar*" India. This issue is of utmost importance for South Asia. As South Asia is the world's youngest region, where unemployment and climate vulnerabilities are vital concerns.[7]

## Strategic Autonomy and De-Hyphenation

The guiding principles of India's foreign policy,[8] such as "strategic autonomy" and "de-hyphenation", are championed by Madhav in this book (pp. 112-15). Strategic autonomy allows India to avoid binding alignments. He describes strategic autonomy as "a proactive, interest-based diplomacy that allows India to engage with diverse global powers, like the QUAD and BRICS, strictly based on its own national security and economic priorities rather than inherited ideologies."[9] De-hyphenation urges New Delhi to "*stop viewing*

[6] A. Trigunayat, "India's Quest for Global South Leadership: Reforming Multilateralism for a Multipolar World," *IMPRI Insights*, April 21, 2024, https://impriinsights.in/indias-quest-for-global-south-leadership-reforming-multilateralism-for-a-multipolar-world/.

[7] South Asia is a critical focus for global development as it is home to one of the world's largest and youngest populations, with a youth unemployment rate projected at approximately 15.4% in 2025. The region also faces extreme climate risks; by 2030, nearly 90% of its population is expected to be at risk of extreme heat, while nearly a quarter faces severe flooding. World Bank, *From Risk to Resilience: Helping People and Firms Adapt in South Asia* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2025), accessed June 15, 2026, https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/sar/publication/from-risk-to-resilience-helping-people-and-firms-adapt-in-south-asia.

[8] S. Jaishankar, *The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World* (New Delhi: HarperCollins India, 2020).

[9] "De-Hyphenation, Strategic Autonomy Can Tackle State, Non-State Players: Ram Madhav's Book," *The Print*, July 13, 2025, https://theprint.in/india/de-hyphenation-strategic-autonomy-can-tackle-state-non-state-players-ram-madhavs-book/2688827/.

*bilateral ties through the lens of third-party rivalries, such as India-U.S. relations vis-a-vis Pakistan or India-Russia ties* vis-a-vis the U.S."[10] This prescription also resonates with South Asia. These small states also seek autonomy from great-power rivalries.

## Civilisational Identity and "Dharmocracy"

One of the book's most distinctive features is its emphasis on India's civilisational identity as a normative resource. He introduces the idea of "*Dharmocracy*", a governance model rooted in dharmic values such as balance, pluralism, and duty and is contrasted with Western liberalism (pp. 173-98). This approach highlights India's soft power potential but also raises issues about inclusivity in South Asia's plural context.

## Strengths of the Book

We do find multidimensional analysis generally in traditional geopolitics, but this book offers a multidimensional analysis in the context of current geopolitics. Madhav captures the structural challenges that South Asian states face by contextualising them in terms of technology, demographics, and climate change (pp. 342-70). His normative imagination is interesting, which anchors global engagement in innovative civilisational values and provides an alternative to Western-centric International Relations theories.[11] This framing is of great significance to South Asian societies, where culture and history strongly influence politics. For South Asian states, navigating between Chinese investments, American security guarantees, and Indian regional dominance is complex.[12] Therefore, Madhav finds the focus on strategic autonomy meaningful as this doctrine underscores the importance of agency (pp. 282-310).

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[10] Ravi Kumar, "The New World: 21st Century Global Order and India (2025), by Ram Madhav," *India's World*, November 2, 2025, https://indiasworld.in/the-new-world-21st-century-global-order-and-india-2025-by-ram-madhav/.

[11] Ram Madhav, "Dharmocracy, the Indian Version of Democracy," *Ram Madhav* (blog), June 2, 2023, https://www.rammadhav.in/articles/dharmocracy-the-indian-version-of-democracy/.

[12] Anand Kumar, *Strategic Rebalancing: China and US Engagement with South Asia* (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2024).

## Limitations and Critiques

Despite valuable insights given in this book, from a South Asian perspective, the book has several limitations. First, we find over-optimisation about India's agency and the country's constraints, such as uneven infrastructure, bureaucratic inefficiency, and social divisions that can limit its global leadership potential (pp. 172-230). Second, we find the civilisational framework slightly slippery. Even if "Dharmocracy" may have an emphasis on ethical governance, there are risks of exclusion of minority voices and being governed through a majoritarian lens.[13] This is problematic in South Asia's context of plural societies.[14]

Third, we do not find comprehensive implementation roadmaps in the book, as many policy prescriptions lack detail, especially in the context of calls to "invest in R&D" or "reform multilateralism" (pp. 332-80). Execution matters more than rhetoric, especially in the context of resource-constrained South Asian states. Fourth, there is an over-optimisation for neighbourhood policy.[15] There is a history of distrust in South Asia, especially between states like India and Pakistan, or India and Nepal. Smaller states perceive Indian leadership as hegemonic, but civilisational fraternity cannot easily overcome this distrust, complicating Madhav's regional vision.[16] Ram Madhav's regional vision is based on the concept of "civilisational fraternity". This is the idea that argues that historical, cultural, and spiritual roots can serve as a base for South Asian unity. However, this vision faces a structural bottleneck, i.e. a history of geopolitical distrust that cultural affinity alone cannot erase.

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[13] Reema Dudekula, "Ram Madhav's Take on How to Navigate a New World," *Tabla*, July 24, 2025, https://www.tabla.com.sg/news/india/ram-madhavs-take-how-navigate-new-world.

[14] The risk of majoritarianism in "*Dharmocracy*" is particularly visible in legislative shifts such as the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), where religious faith becomes a primary criterion for inclusion, potentially reconfiguring the legal landscape to the detriment of minority populations. M. Mohsin Alam Bhat, "'The Irregular' and the Unmaking of Minority Citizenship: The Rules of Law in Majoritarian India," *Social & Legal Studies* 33, no. 5 (2024): 690–721, https://doi.org/10.1177/09646639241238427.

[15] Alexandre Lambert and Faisal Ahmed, "India and the Future of Asian Geopolitics," in *India's Geopolitical Gravity: The 21st Century Gamechanger* (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2025), 237–93.

[16] "Book Review: The New World," *India Strategic*, July 9, 2025, https://www.indiastrategic.in/book-review-the-new-world.

## Implications for South Asia

The most important implications of Madhav's arguments in the book are the significance of strategic autonomy in the context of South Asia. India's emphasis on autonomy can be an inspiration for states such as Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bhutan. This can be helpful, particularly in their attempts to balance external pressures. However, their economic dependencies on bigger powers like the U.S. and China can problematise this.[17] Madhav posits that Chinese loans and infrastructure investments, for example, have tied countries like Sri Lanka and Nepal into intricate webs of dependency, limiting their ability to exercise full independence in foreign policy (pp. 90-92). Therefore, we can say that the structural realities restrict these nations from following India's path. Madhav calls for the creation of trust and inclusivity among smaller states, along with India's leadership for greater cooperation within South Asia (pp. 171-245).

The other issue highlighted in the book is the role of technology and youth demographics in shaping the future of South Asia. The region has a good potential for a demographic dividend, with one of the youngest populations in the world. The youth can become a transformative force if they are empowered with digital skills, innovation ecosystems, and employment opportunities.[18] Problems like unemployment and disillusionment could fuel instability if the aspirations are not met. Given this context, various scholars underline that in South Asia, the challenge is to translate demographic potential into tangible developmental outcomes, which requires investments in education, vocational training, and technology adoption.

The emphasis placed on civilisational politics by Madhav in his book can have mixed implications for South Asia. The cultural diplomacy of shared heritage can enhance India's soft power. This can give leverage to India to place itself as a civilisational leader in the region. This can be true in the context of

[17] A. Barthwal and A. E. Rio, *India in South Asia: Quest for Regional Dominance in a Multipolar World* (Oslo: Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, 2026).

[18] Syed Basim Raza, "South Asia's Strategic Shift: How India Lost the Diplomatic Initiative with Its Neighbors," *The Diplomat*, December 30, 2025, https://thediplomat.com/2025/12/south-asias-strategic-shift-how-india-lost-the-diplomatic-initiative-with-its-neighbors/.

stronger cultural and spiritual connections across South Asian societies. But there may be a risk that such civilisational framing may deepen identity politics in countries with multi-ethnic and multi-religious populations.[19] In this context, Madhav underlines that inclusivity becomes essential for these South Asian societies; without it, the invocation of cultural unity may generate exclusionary narratives that destabilise domestic politics and regional harmony (pp. 251-330).

## Conclusion

In the debates on global order, Ram Madhav's *The New World: 21st-Century Global Order and India* is a provocative and timely intervention. The strength of the book lies in its multidimensional analysis. In this book, there is a call for India to assert itself with confidence. From a South Asian perspective, the book must also be evaluated along with its domestic constraints, regional mistrust, and the risks of civilisational politics.[20] We find in the book a call for action: that South Asia must have an agency in shaping its future within a fractured global order. It offers critical points of debate for scholars, policymakers, and students, as well as inspiration for further research on the themes touched upon in this book.

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[19] S. Pathak, "India's Strategic Deployment of Soft Power in South Asia: Challenges and Prospects," *Journal of Delhi College of Arts and Commerce* 7, no. 1 (2024): 45–58.

[20] Louise Fawcett and Sharinee L. Jagtiani, "Regional Powers, Global Aspirations: Lessons from India and Iran," *International Politics* 61, no. 1 (2024): 215–38, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-022-00374-z.

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